

# School Attendance 1880-1939: a study of policy and practice in response to the problem of truancy

THE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE GAZETTE.

1903.



“ Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of these little ones——”

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Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Trinity Term 2007

Abstract

The thesis covers two sides of the truancy problem in the period following compulsory school attendance – the truanting children and their parents, and the local authorities charged with enforcing the law. The introduction covers current concerns about truancy and school attendance, which have increased in prominence since the 1980s. Chapter 2 reviews the historiography, which has mainly debated working-class attitudes towards compulsory schooling in the nineteenth century. This study draws instead on the insights of development economists into household decision-making over children's schooling to investigate the effectiveness of enforcement in several contrasting localities – rural and urban, industrial and agricultural, and in a seaside resort. The thesis brings together evidence to show that local authorities could make an impact on attendance levels, even in unpropitious local circumstances. Chapter 3 considers the success of measures to improve attendance up to 1900. Chapter 4 offers a detailed case study of a sample of truants and their families from Coventry in the period 1874-99. Chapters 5 to 7 cover 1900-39 and demonstrate changes in the enforcement of attendance, within the context of growing local government services related to child welfare and the family. Attendance officers' local knowledge of working-class families supported the delivery of child welfare legislation in the period after 1906, including special education, assessment of families for free school meals, assistance with medical treatment and the policing of restrictions on children's street trading. Attendance officers also supervised children deemed at risk of offending, who were committed to institutions. These additions to the enforcement role led increasingly to a remedial, rather than punitive, approach to truancy during the 1920s and 30s. The conclusion returns to contemporary policy issues over truancy and sets in context the historical reasons why it has proved such a long-standing problem for government and schools.

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Long Abstract

Truancy was, and still is, ill-defined, since some absences are condoned, accepted or tolerated by society for particular reasons in particular places. What the authorities today, and those in past, call truancy is simply absence from school that is not acceptable to them. The current anxiety about poor school attendance, indiscipline and disaffected youth reflected in media headlines and government agendas provides an interesting starting point for any study of truancy in the past. Twenty-first century society is just as prone to moral panics as our nineteenth and twentieth-century forebears – the recent concern about binge drinking, hooliganism, disorder and a general lack of ‘respect’ mirror similar fears about social breakdown at the end of the nineteenth century. We find today’s Government reaching for the same sorts of strategies to persuade and even coerce parents to fulfil the responsibilities expected of them in relation to compulsory school attendance – warnings, fines and ultimately imprisonment are used as both a deterrent to others and a demonstration of ‘last resort’. The dilemmas faced by the state over school attendance and the strategies employed today mirror to some extent the issues which the state faced in the past. In order to understand why these similarities exist, this study traces the development of the relationship between the state and the family in the context of school attendance.

The thesis is introduced in the first two chapters; the first places the issue of truancy in a contemporary context, whilst showing the many apparent similarities between the approaches advocated by the Government today and those pursued in the past. Chapter two reviews the historiographical background to the issue of school attendance within the work of four historians, Steve Humphries, Phil Gardner, J.S. Hurt and Jonathan Rose. Humphries and Gardner argue that there was a degree of solidarity and cultural

opposition to compulsory schooling which was expressed in forms of truancy or a preference for private schooling by working-class parents. Hurt refers to an undercurrent of antipathy towards state schooling which persisted well into the twentieth century. Rose presents a much more positive view of working-class reactions to elementary schooling, despite the hardships of working-class life and the expectation that children would leave school at the earliest opportunity to contribute to family incomes. In contrast to the focus on attitudes, the chapter then reviews the contribution of development economists and economic historians who have pointed to the critical effects of labour market opportunities on household decision-making over schooling. Compulsory attendance by-laws from 1880 certainly made an impact on children's participation in elementary schooling, but regular attendance depended much more on the impact of enforcement at local level.

The thesis covers two sides of the truancy problem in the period following compulsion – the truanting children and their parents, and the local authorities charged with enforcing the law. It is arranged chronologically in two periods, 1880-1900 (covered in chapters 3 and 4) and 1900-39 (covered in chapters 5, 6 and 7). There are a number of themes which run through the whole thesis. There is an examination of legal changes relating to child welfare and juvenile justice, and an analysis of trends in absenteeism and prosecution in each chapter. The contrast between urban and rural enforcement is also followed throughout the thesis. The growing role of the state in relation to the family and the power relations inherent in that role form an important undercurrent to all the analysis. The thesis also shows how changes took place in local authority attitudes towards truants and their families, and why new ideas were taken up, especially in the period just after the First World War.

Chapter three sets out the legal framework and government approach to compulsory attendance, with a review of national and regional trends over the period 1870-1900. This forms the backdrop to an analysis of the impact of local circumstances on the commitment of local authorities to compulsion and the effectiveness of their enforcement activities. The response of parents and children is also placed in the local context, with

particular reference to opportunities for child labour. The thesis covers a range of localities – rural and urban, industrial and agricultural. Despite the fact that legal compulsion was in place over the whole country from 1880, if too many of the community refused to co-operate then it was extremely difficult for the new local authorities to increase attendance significantly. A key motivation for supporting enforcement of school attendance in urban areas was the perception that there were too many unsupervised children on the streets, increasing the risk of delinquency. What ensued in most places was a negotiated approach to reducing truancy by the authorities, with prosecution as the final action in a series of enforcement steps. In some cases, truants who were thought to be at risk of neglect or criminal activity were committed to industrial or truant schools. Local circumstances also affected the rate of prosecution in particular areas, but the evidence shows that local authorities could make an impact on attendance levels, even in unpropitious local circumstances, such as those in the West Yorkshire textile districts.

In rural areas, the priorities of the enforcement agencies were different from those in the towns. Moral or social concerns about the control of children's behaviour and time were not apparent – instead, local authorities generally tried to balance the needs of the local agricultural community with the government's requirements. They did not want trouble from 'on high', but often the threat of action by the Education Department was remote, both geographically and practically, and weighed little against the immediate needs of the local community. What might be termed 'defeatist strategies' were really just lines of least resistance both to government and to the agricultural interest. Called into existence by central government, many of the smaller rural school attendance committees and even elected school boards lacked the sense of legitimacy and educational purpose of many urban local authorities. Nonetheless, average attendance rates in rural areas rose gradually, helped significantly by the ending of school fees.

Chapter 4 explores the nature of truancy through records of prosecutions in Coventry between 1874 and 1899. Using census data for 1881 and 1891 to supplement the Coventry source, it has been possible to build up a detailed picture of the social, familial

and economic circumstances of a large sample of truants, their families and the neighbourhoods in which they lived. In the 1880s, the authorities conducted 'truancy blitzes' on neighbourhoods in the poorest parts of the city. An analysis of these neighbourhoods shows that they did contain many of the poorest families, but the truants came from a variety of backgrounds. Some were the children of skilled workers, albeit on the fringes of declining trades. The chapter concludes that by the 1890s, the authorities were concentrating on a smaller number of repeat offenders, which included a higher proportion of female-headed households. These were likely to be poorer since they lacked a breadwinner. However, it was also the case that by the 1890s, the majority of truants were not concentrated in particular parts of town and came from a wider variety of socio-economic backgrounds than in the 1880s.

Chapter 5 covers the critical changes taking place in the realm of child welfare in the period 1906-14, which affected the way in which school attendance was enforced. There had already been a decline in prosecutions for non-attendance, but school attendance departments received additional investment as they took on many bureaucratic and surveillance tasks associated with new local authority functions in relation to the family, such as assessment of families eligible for free school meals or subsidies for medical treatment in school clinics. At the same time, ideas about the treatment of truants and their families began to change, such as the suggestion from the Board of Education that attendance monitoring be merged with 'welfare' roles, such as the school nurse. Case studies are used to assess the effects of the introduction of school feeding and interventions over children's health on rates of attendance. Chapter 6 shows that the First World War was an interruption to the trend towards ever-better attendance rates at elementary schools, with an increase in truancy and in parental pressure for children to leave school early to take advantage of the buoyant labour market generated during wartime. The ambivalent response of the Board of Education to this pressure left little scope for those local authorities who wanted to maintain restrictions on children's work, especially in rural areas, and it was difficult to restore the position after the War. However, the 1918 Education Act made the position clearer as it ended all early exemptions from compulsory schooling under the age of 14, which had been an avenue

for disputes between parents and local authorities. By the early 1920s, attendance rates had recovered almost to the levels of the immediate pre-War years. Prosecutions fell away quickly, accompanied by a swift decline in the use of residential correctional schools for truants. This trend was the result of changes in the perception of truancy, which was coming to be seen as a product of difficult family circumstances, whether social, emotional or economic. Increasingly, local authorities began to adopt 'social work' approaches to persistent truants and their families. Chapter 7 charts the impact of this and other changes in the practice of attendance enforcement over the period 1900-39, using both local sources and the records of the attendance officers' association. The process of change amongst personnel 'on the ground' reflected the permeation of new ideas about childcare, poverty and the interests of the state in having healthy and 'normal' children, ideas which had been brought into the local authority by the absorption of services provided previously by voluntary agencies. By the late 1920s, the changes in services had brought within the direct employ of local authorities new professional groups who could claim authority and expertise in the field of child welfare – school medical officers, school nurses, juvenile employment workers, in addition to the many volunteer roles which were integral to the operation of Education Departments at local level. These new professional groups stood to some extent in competition with school attendance officer and their impact over time on the philosophy of school attendance, how it should be dealt with and enforced, is visible in the pressures and contradictions which attendance officers increasingly articulated both locally and within their national association.

Chapter 7 concludes with an assessment of the nature of truancy in 1939, to assess the extent of change in the problem in the six decades of enforcement of the law on compulsory attendance. The major source for this assessment is a study undertaken in 1947, just after the War, by a social economist at the Ministry of Health in association with the Ministry of Education. The study revealed significant variation in school attendance depending on the socio-economic status of the family and the type of housing in a particular area. However, a significant finding was that the attendance rates of children from families with the same socio-economic status were significantly affected

by the neighbourhood in which the child attended school. This ‘neighbourhood effect’ had also been a feature of the Coventry evidence in chapter 4 covering the first three decades of compulsory attendance. The 1947 study highlighted also the continuities in truancy in terms of a ‘hard core’ of persistent truants, often from the same families, and a much larger group of children whose parents condoned occasional absences from school. This pattern was observable from the 1880s onwards, indicating important areas of continuity in the nature of truancy, despite the reduction in poverty or child labour as a prime cause over the period to 1939. There had been much more change in the attitudes and approaches of local authorities to the problem, as they moved from punitive towards remedial strategies for tackling it. The realisation that children’s needs – physical, mental and emotional – were varied and the growing interest in the home and family had drawn official attention away from the issue of merely enforcing the law on compulsory attendance. Instead truancy was treated as an indicator of other problems, such as sickness, family instability or poverty. Some children previously considered to be truanting or wilfully absent, with or without the knowledge of their parents, were now labelled in other ways, as needing help of various kinds and therefore subject to specific remedial activity by agencies outside the school attendance department.

Chapter 8 draws together the key findings from the study and then addresses a number of contemporary policy issues related to school attendance. The thesis offers support for the view that economic need underlay much of the truancy seen in the early period up to 1900 and to some extent right through to 1939 there were families whose poverty was the prime cause of children’s absenteeism. However, the evidence points to subtler factors at work, such as the influence of neighbourhood and individual family circumstances. Truancy, whether parentally-condoned or not, arose more out of an instrumental viewpoint common amongst some working-class parents in which schooling was weighed against other family priorities, such as the additional help a child could give at home or additional income it could bring in from working. However, there is no evidence of any solidarity amongst truants or their parents within working-class communities against compulsory schooling as such. Enforcement and other legislative restrictions increasingly impinged on parents’ control of their children’s time; however, the penalties

for non-attendance did not deter many parents or children from an occasional absence from school.

The chapter also concludes that the impact of local authorities on attendance rates has been under-estimated in the period 1870-1900. School attendance also played a key role in the development of children's services within modern LEAs after 1902 and they in turn brought a new level of efficiency to the work of enforcement, especially in rural areas. The story is one of continuity as well as change, with LEAs retaining their 'policing' role over school attendance, whilst adopting remedial approaches for some if not all truants. However, the move to remedial and even therapeutic approaches also required more information on truants and their families. This and the growth of welfare provision for school children increased the levels of surveillance of working-class families by local authorities.

Contemporary concerns about truancy tend to highlight the intransigence of a problem on which the current Government has spent many millions of pounds in the past ten years. This study shows that there were persistent features of truancy over a period of sixty years, which indicated deep-seated problems related to the relationship between some working-class families and schooling which may well still be influential today. However, the evidence also shows that strategies pursued effectively and relentlessly by local authorities had results in improving attendance and this offers equally important support for the consistent application of policies and strategies to influence the behaviour of truants or their parents.

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## List of Abbreviations

CC	County Council
CCEC	County Council Education Committee
DCM	Distinguished Conduct Medal
EC	Education Committee (of the LEA)
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HMI	Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools
ILP	Independent Labour Party
IS/TS	Industrial School/Truant School
LEA	Local Education Authority
LCC	London County Council
MOH	Medical Officer of Health
NAO	National Audit Office
NASWE	National Association of Social Workers in Education
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
P.P.	Parliamentary Papers
SAC	School Attendance Committee (formed by Poor Law Union or Town Council)
SAO	School Attendance Officer
SAONA	School Attendance Officers National Association
SAIONA	School Attendance and Investigation Officers National Association
SB	School Board
SBAC	School Board Attendance Committee or Sub-Committee
SDF	Social Democratic Federation
SMO	School Medical Officer
TGWU	Transport and General Workers Union

**Note on references to local sources:** the abbreviated codes used to indicate primary sources from local archives are set out in full in the bibliography under the relevant archive heading.

## Introduction: Truancy Present and Past

**‘After more than 130 years of compulsory schooling and a century of research into school absenteeism and truancy we are little nearer finding definitive solutions.’<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

This thesis is a study of those who were not where they were supposed to be. It is a study of children marked ‘not present’. Their absence was noted and acted upon by teachers, headteachers, school attendance officers, clergymen, doctors, councillors, elected school board members, even journalists and of course magistrates. Their parents were brought to answer for their absence. But the children themselves are as elusive in the record as they were in real life, offering little comment and even less in the way of explanation for their absence from school.

Absence from school was a symptom of many things in a child’s life – whether willingly or unwillingly, a decision by a child or parent had been made not to conform to society’s requirements. Today we all accept the right of the state to compel children to be educated, mainly by attending school. But that was not the case for most children before the 1870s – in fact the imposition of compulsory schooling represented a major intervention by the state in family life. Before that, only those within poor law institutions had experienced any comparable interference in parental rights. The first foray by the state into enforcing parental responsibility was in the area of vaccination, and this sparked serious social and political opposition in the 1850s. The use of compulsion in relation to schooling was debated, but not resisted in terms of any campaign or protest. Its introduction was gradual but had major implications for parents’ control over their children’s time and earnings. Was there ‘resistance’ by the working classes in the form of non-compliance with the law? If so, an examination of the incidence and treatment of truancy is perhaps a key to understanding it. At the core of this study is an attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Reid, "The Causes, Views and Traits of School Absenteeism and Truancy: An Analytical Review", *Research in Education* 74 (Nov. 2005), p.78.

understand how a significant and relatively uniform social habit, regular attendance of all children at school, was established in different local communities and why some parents and children did not conform to the state's, and increasingly society's, expectations.

### **The cultural hinterland of truancy**

At the heart of common attitudes to truancy is an ancient ambivalence. On the one hand, the freedom to 'skip off' for the day appeals to the ideal of carefree childhood, adventure and the feeling that sometimes we need to defy authority and break the rules in order simply to grow up and take responsibility as adults. Truancy of this sort, formally-disapproved but somehow also 'understandable', has long antecedents in popular culture – for both adults and children. The fact that the BBC 'Voices' Project in 2004-5 discovered more than 50 different dialect words for truanting, including the picturesque 'playing the dolly' used in Coventry and Warwickshire, seems to substantiate the impression that truanting was a playful form of childhood rebellion which did no real harm and even established the independence of children at an age when they were ready to foray out into the world on their own.<sup>2</sup>

However, for most children and young people involved in persistent absenteeism from school, truanting was not just due to a playful desire to rebel against authority and structure. Unlike the stereotype above, most absence from school in the past was not for play, but for work, either in the home or a formal workplace. Girls took more time off school than boys, usually because they were needed to help their mothers at home, yet these absences caused less concern than those of boys and were even condoned by the authorities at times.<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, a recent study has found that older girls still have more absence than boys, although boys experience a greater reduction in GCSE attainment as a result of their absences from school.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [www.bbc.co.uk/voices/results/wordmap/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/voices/results/wordmap/) (cited 15.5.2007).

<sup>3</sup> Felicity Hunt (ed.), *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women, 1850-1950* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p.84.

<sup>4</sup> Marian Morris and Simon Rutt, *An Analysis of Pupil Attendance Data in Excellence in City Areas: An Interim Report*, Department for Education and Skills Research Report RR571 (HMSO 2004) pp.i-ii.

Similarly, the evidence about the effects of truancy gained from recent studies shows that persistent absence from school is damaging to children, families and to society as a whole. Pupils who truant frequently or for long periods are more likely to leave school with few or no qualifications, to be unable to find a job and to be drawn into anti-social or criminal behaviour. They are more likely to experience some form of addiction, to endure unemployment or experience problems in their adult relationships.<sup>5</sup>

### **Modern anxieties and concerns**

The current anxiety about poor school attendance, indiscipline and disaffected youth reflected in media headlines and government agendas provides an interesting starting point for any study of truancy in the past.<sup>6</sup> Twenty-first century society is just as prone to moral panics as our nineteenth and twentieth-century forebears – the recent concerns about binge drinking, hooliganism, disorder and a general lack of ‘respect’ mirror similar fears about social breakdown at the end of the nineteenth century. The answer then was to apply the new ‘social science’ techniques to social problems by building up statistical and survey information which would then lead to a rational solution. Perhaps today there is less faith in ‘social positivism’ but governments’ strategies for parenting and schools nonetheless rest on similar assumptions about the ability of expert intervention to modify old attitudes and instil new ones. We find today’s Government reaching for the same sorts of strategies to persuade and even coerce parents to fulfil the responsibilities expected of them in relation to compulsory school attendance – warnings, fines and ultimately imprisonment are used as both a deterrent to others and a demonstration of ‘last resort’.<sup>7</sup> Anyone who has seen the TV series ‘Brat Camp’ will identify many of the elements of the truant schools set up by school boards in the nineteenth century – rigid

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<sup>5</sup> National Audit Office NAO, *Improving School Attendance in England* (Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, HMSO, Feb. 2005) p.3; David Farrington, "Truancy, Delinquency, the Home and the School", in Lionel Hersov and Ian Berg (eds.), *Out of School: Modern Perspectives in Truancy and School Refusal* (Chichester: Wiley, 1980), p.58.

<sup>6</sup> See for instance, virtually all national daily paper front-page headlines for 1.2.2005 on indiscipline in schools.

<sup>7</sup> The most ‘celebrated’ case is that of Patricia Amos of Banbury, Oxon., sentenced to prison twice for not sending her children to school. She featured in a TV programme ‘A Truant’s Mum’, BBC2 at 9.50pm on 3.2.2005.

rules, instant discipline and hard physical tasks which form the basis of a strategy for behaviour modification in a remote rural location.<sup>8</sup>

In February 2005, the National Audit Office published its report 'Improving school attendance in England' which noted that the average daily absence rate for state schools in England was then nearly 7% (equivalent to 450,000 pupils missing on any one school day).<sup>9</sup> The NAO analysed effective practice across LEAs, noting that some were much more focused on attendance than others. Effective practice was linked to clear policies in the school on attendance which were effectively communicated to parents and consistently enforced. The regular collection of data and quick follow-up were vital to getting pupils back to school, as well as collaboration between schools in similar circumstances. Reward schemes for pupils with good attendance were thought to be motivating. But for persistent truancy, first the threat and then the use of legal sanctions were the likely strategies for LEAs and most recently for school heads.<sup>10</sup> The remarkable feature of this panoply of responses to truancy is the parallel they form with late nineteenth-century practice. The revival in the past five years of the use of fines and imprisonment has been controversial, as any liberal reading of the national and local media reveals.<sup>11</sup> In an age when the benefits of education are supposedly self-evident, the effectiveness of punishing parents in order to change behaviour is questioned. Nonetheless, there is an evident exasperation amongst local authorities at the recalcitrance of families of persistent truants, despite the repeated efforts of education welfare services to support them to get their children to school on a regular basis.

The Government and the NAO acknowledge that some schools face bigger problems than others, largely due to the social and economic circumstances of pupils. This had also been

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<sup>8</sup> In 'Brat Camp' a group of teenagers who have exhibited challenging behaviour (almost all have truanted from school) are taken to a remote camp in the Utah desert where they have to complete a series of demanding physical challenges under the tutelage of firm but fair instructors. The aim is to build qualities of self-reliance as well as teamworking with other members of the Camp. In Jan. 2005, Channel 4 won a 'Best Documentary Series' Broadcasting Award for the first series shown in 2004.

<sup>9</sup> NAO, *Improving School Attendance in England*, p.4.

<sup>10</sup> From 2005 headteachers were given the power to levy fines of £50 on the parents of persistent truants. For instance, Oxford Mail for Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> December 2004 on the threat of use in an Oxford School.

<sup>11</sup> Inserting the word 'truancy' into the search engine of [www.bbc.co.uk/news](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news) (cited 23.5.2007) brings up 102 pages of items dating from 2000-07.

recognised by local authorities in the late nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, from 1880 onwards, average school attendance rose consistently across England so that by 1909, shortly after the creation of modern local education authorities, it had reached 90% for pupils aged 5-14.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, it remained at or near this level, without receiving much attention for the next 70 years.<sup>14</sup> While the parallels between the current focus on school attendance and the same patterns of concern and response in the late nineteenth century are interesting, it is even more fascinating to discover that the issue of truancy went ‘underground’ for such a long period of time. Perhaps this is not surprising, as there had been little concern expressed ‘from the top’, that is to say from either the Board of Education up to 1944, or from its successor Ministry and then Department for Education and Science after the Second World War. Had truancy ceased to be a problem for schools? Or was it just the case that the level of regular attendance by the majority of school children was deemed acceptable by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century? In that case, it may not have seemed worthy of official attention when new concerns, for instance over child health and feeding or the raising of the school leaving age, were occupying the public agenda. If so, then the switch of ‘attention’ to other concerns, and presumably the resources to meet those, would be reflected in local authority practice in the first half of the twentieth century. This study therefore focuses primarily on changes in official attitudes towards truancy and school attendance – looking at both national and local policies and practice.

The question about whether something troubling had ceased to be a problem, or simply fell down the pecking order of demands for resources is an interesting one. Why was there a sudden revival of interest by government, schools and researchers in truancy in the 1980s? The answer lies in politics and economics. In October 1976, the then Prime Minister, Jim Callaghan, sparked the ‘Great Education Debate’ following a keynote

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<sup>12</sup> NAO, *Improving School Attendance in England*, p.5; David Rubinstein, *School Attendance in London 1870-1904: A Social History* (Hull: University of Hull Publications, 1969), p.112.

<sup>13</sup> The 90% figure is a national average, but the variation over the country by this date was small. It includes a proportion of absence attributable to childhood epidemic disease, a cause of absence which would be negligible today.

<sup>14</sup> Ken Reid, *Truancy and Schools* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.20.

speech at Ruskin College, Oxford.<sup>15</sup> The performance of state education came under increasing scrutiny in the light of Britain's relative economic decline and the increased competitiveness of global markets. The scrutiny was intensified in the Thatcher years as league tables, Ofsted inspection and auditing were introduced for LEAs and schools. Schools were now made accountable for the performance of persistently absent and often troublesome pupils – a factor which led to rising exclusion rates in state secondary schools. It also led to increased attention being paid to truancy at national and local level.

### **The truanting child**

Modern analysts agree that truancy results from a number of factors and can be examined from a range of perspectives, but attempts to categorise truanting children and their families in order to isolate particular causes (and then treat them) have proved problematic.<sup>16</sup>

Reid suggests that low aspirations or alienation from school, as well as difficulties caused by emotional stress at home, help undermine regular attendance at school. Troubled home backgrounds are common amongst truants. Not surprisingly, the correlation between poverty, poor-quality housing and large families with higher than average levels of truancy tends to reinforce the image of the truant as 'socially excluded'. Self-exclusion from school would therefore be just another aspect of being an 'outsider'.<sup>17</sup> Humphries' oral history work suggests that the association of truancy with social exclusion also has long antecedents.<sup>18</sup> Sociologists have used the notions of cultural and social capital to understand the impact of parental involvement on truancy.<sup>19</sup> Just as Bourdieu pointed to the advantages gained by those with wealth and networks of cultural capital, those

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<sup>15</sup> Denis Gleeson, "Truancy and Compulsory Schooling: A Socio-Historical Account", in Pat Carlen, Denis Gleeson, and Julia Wardhaugh (eds.), *Truancy: The Politics of Compulsory Schooling* (Buckingham: OUP, 1992), pp.36-42.

<sup>16</sup> Reid, "Causes, Views and Traits", p.61.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.64.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels? An Oral History of Working-Class Childhood and Youth 1889-1939* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), pp.232-3.

<sup>19</sup> Kevin Denny, "Born to Be Wild? The Effect of Birth Order, Families and Schools on Truancy", in *Centre for Economic Research Working Paper* (Dublin: University College, July 2004). p.1.

without these assets would have been more likely to opt out or withdraw from a situation where they were obviously at a disadvantage compared with other children. The links between poverty, lifestyle and truancy were recognised at the time compulsion was enacted by law.<sup>20</sup> Although shortly following the implementation of compulsion in 1880, a wide range of working-class families were involved, a 'hard core' emerged in the twenty years after – parents who were willing to flout the law repeatedly.<sup>21</sup> The link between social deprivation and higher levels of absenteeism from school is recognised still to be a distinguishing feature of the problem of truancy. Long-term or persistent truanting is however associated only with a small minority of children and families and these are not always the poorest in the community - relative poverty or social deprivation are not sufficient in themselves to explain it.<sup>22</sup>

Alongside the minority of cases of long-term or persistent truancy, there is the problem of occasional and intermittent absenteeism by a larger minority of children.<sup>23</sup> Not all truancy is associated with poverty and deprivation and a significant proportion of absenteeism is parentally-condoned.<sup>24</sup> The casual withdrawal of children from school for family holidays in term time can be disruptive to learning, especially if the school already has poor levels of attendance.<sup>25</sup> The widespread practice of casual absenteeism from school has a long history in some parts of England and Wales associated with parental attitudes to the value of schooling.<sup>26</sup> Development economists have examined truanting behaviour within the context of household decision-making, particularly in relation to the opportunity costs of schooling where child labour is a factor in the economy of developing countries.<sup>27</sup> For Britain between 1880 and 1939, some of the same considerations applied for working-class children nearing the then minimum school

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<sup>20</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1871*, xxii (406) pp.224-5.

<sup>21</sup> Chapter 4, pp.141-44.

<sup>22</sup> NAO, *Improving School Attendance in England*, p.5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>24</sup> Reid, "Causes, Views and Traits", p.60; *Parliamentary Papers 1878*, xxviii (2048) pp.450-1.

<sup>25</sup> *Sunday Times*, 'Cheaper summer holidays to combat truancy', News Section: 18.09.2005.

<sup>26</sup> Reid, *Truancy*, p.14.

<sup>27</sup> Kaushik Basu and Zafiris Tzannatos, "The Global Child Labor Problem: What Do We Know and What Can We Do?" *The World Bank Economic Review* 17, no. 2 (2003); [http://www.channel4.com/news/articles/world/asia\\_pacific/china+frees+brick+factories+slaves.564822](http://www.channel4.com/news/articles/world/asia_pacific/china+frees+brick+factories+slaves.564822) (cited 20.06.2007), Lindsey Hilsum 18.06.2007 'China frees brick factories 'slaves'' reported the rise in child labour due to China's economic expansion.

leaving age (originally 11, rising in stages to 14 in 1918). However, even in the late nineteenth century, schools complained about the impact on school attendance of family holidays, day trips and other leisure attractions for children. Perhaps leisure is a more common cause of absenteeism from school in the early twenty-first century than child labour, though the impact of part-time jobs on the attendance of older schoolchildren is a well-known problem for many schools today.

Non-attendance rates are higher in Britain than in the rest of Europe, which suggests a cultural aspect to the problem of truancy. A cultural antipathy to schooling may have historical roots in the class-based provision of schooling characteristic of nineteenth and early twentieth century England and Wales.<sup>28</sup> A 2003 study found that the parents of regular non-attenders did not consider occasional absence from school a serious issue and they generally had a weaker belief in the importance of school attendance.<sup>29</sup> Such parents may therefore simply be at one end of a spectrum, rather than atypical in their thinking. Underlying parentally-condoned truancy, historians have alluded to a cultural antipathy amongst a section of the working-class population towards state schooling as in some respects irrelevant to their children's needs and as cutting across family and community priorities.<sup>30</sup> In the early twentieth century, most working-class parents certainly thought their children needed to learn the basics, the 3 Rs, but beyond that, some felt that school had little to offer of relevance to later life.<sup>31</sup> Analysis of social mobility in the nineteenth century has confirmed that schooling did not increase the social mobility of the vast majority of working-class children.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, social mobility studies in the twentieth century have demonstrated that working-class children by and large failed to gain from

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<sup>28</sup> Reid, "Causes, Views and Traits", p.60; David Collins, *Managing Truancy in Schools* (London: Cassell, 1998), p.16.

<sup>29</sup> H. Malcolm et al., *Absence from School: A Study of Its Causes and Effects in Seven LEAs* (Department for Education and Skills Report 424, HMSO 2003), p.vi.

<sup>30</sup> Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels?* chaps. 2 & 3; John S. Hurt, *Elementary Schooling and the Working Classes, 1860-1918* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p.212.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Sydney Reynolds, Bob Woolley, and Tom Woolley, *Seems So! A Working-Class View of Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1911), p.40; Standish Meacham, *A Life Apart: The English Working Class 1890-1914* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), pp.173-4; Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2001), p.179.

<sup>32</sup> Jason Long, *The Socioeconomic Return to Primary Schooling in Victorian England*, [www.colby.edu/economics/faculty/jmlong/research/](http://www.colby.edu/economics/faculty/jmlong/research/) (cited 20.02.2006).

the structural and curricular changes which took place after 1907 and from 1944.<sup>33</sup> There has been considerable social change over the past 50 years, with the expansion of the middle-class and a shrinking working-class, accompanied by an increase in the availability of higher education. However, once again, those in the lower socio-economic groups have not made significant social or economic gains from education and the rate of social mobility via education has even slowed down.<sup>34</sup> Recent discussion on the use of selection in education has again highlighted the fact that too little attention has been paid to improving the curriculum and the schools attended by the mass of working-class children in England and Wales.<sup>35</sup> Historical perspectives on the actual and perceived value of education to working-class children may help explain a more casual attitude to school attendance amongst some parents.

### **The state and the family today**

Gradually, governments recognised that the needs of working-class families and children went beyond the provision of basic schooling, though the introduction of welfare reforms such as school feeding was hindered by the strong belief that such support would undermine parental responsibilities and reward fecklessness.<sup>36</sup> The modern state goes far beyond what was available to schools and local authorities a century ago to coax and support the parents of truants and the children themselves. Yet the dilemmas faced by the state over school attendance and the strategies employed today mirror to some extent the issues which the state faced in the past. In order to understand why these similarities exist, it is important to trace the development of the relationship between the state and the family in the context of school attendance.

Even in 1880, a typical working-class family already encountered the agents of the state in many guises, via the Poor Law, the police, the local rating authority, the Sanitary

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<sup>33</sup> A.H. Halsey, A.F. Heath and J.M. Ridge, *Origins and Destinations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

<sup>34</sup> *The Guardian*, 'The rickety ladder of life', leader article 11.06.2007.

<sup>35</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 'But who cares about the pupils who fail?' by Minette Marin 20.05.2007.

<sup>36</sup> Jane Martin, *Women and the Politics of Schooling in Victorian and Edwardian England* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999), pp.122-7.

Authority or the census enumerator. In addition, the interventions of a myriad of voluntary agencies, for instance, the NSPCC or the Charity Organisation Society, into the homes and lives of working-class families show that working-class family life was already being closely observed and commented upon before the introduction of compulsory schooling. However, the creation of school boards and local attendance committees brought with them a new and near-universal official oversight of working-class children and their families. Over the last century, the state has taken over many of the voluntary functions performed by charities and the welfare state has added to the role of the state in relation to family life. Given the huge expansion in spending on families and children over the past fifty years, it is not surprising that the state has become more intrusive – at least in terms of advising parents. In November 2004, the then Children’s Minister, Margaret Hodge, sparked opposition from MPs when she praised the role of the government in family life, saying, ‘Some may call it the nanny state, but I call it a force for good.’<sup>37</sup> At the heart of the controversy is the question of whether the state has a right to determine the correct way to raise children. In relation to schooling, it has for 130 years claimed the right to do so and paid the cost from general taxation, but as truancy and school attendance issues demonstrate, conformity must be negotiated with families and cannot be taken for granted.

Recently, it has been suggested that instead of viewing the past century as one in which the state has ‘opened up’ the family by its interventions, we should see it as a period in which the family has been surprisingly resilient, even stubbornly resistant, in the face of state interventions where these did not chime with parents’ preferences.<sup>38</sup> Although the vast majority of parents and children conform to the state’s requirement for regular school attendance, this insight about the resistance of families to unwanted intervention may help to explain the relative inability of the state to change the behaviour of the minority of children who do truant and the parents who seemingly condone absenteeism.

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<sup>37</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/4044815.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4044815.stm) (cited 11.5.2007), ‘‘Nanny state’ Minister under fire’, 26.11.2004.

<sup>38</sup> Deborah Thom, ‘‘Parental advice, political activism and punishment’’, paper presented at the Social History Society of the UK, 32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference, Exeter University, 1 April 2006.

## Strategies for tackling truancy

Truancy is not a one-dimensional issue relating only to being off school – sociologists, psychologists and educational experts all recognise the links between non-attendance and family problems and the increased likelihood of under-achievement, disaffection and juvenile crime amongst persistent truants. Recent news commentators have raised the issue of whether persistent truancy is the product of a failure of parenting.<sup>39</sup> The NAO lends support to this view in the following words:-

Many head teachers and local authorities consider that negative parental attitudes to education are the external factor that is most closely associated with high rates of absence. Their views are supported by our analysis of the findings of Ofsted inspections, as well as by research that has shown a link between parental attitudes and truancy. Changing the views of parents and carers who do not see the value of their children attending school regularly takes time and is unlikely to be achieved quickly.

These views differ little from opinions voiced by HMIs and local authorities more than a hundred years previously.<sup>40</sup> While it is clear that regular attendance is important for the long-term prospects of children, parents and children can be influenced more by short-term considerations; hence the need for compulsion both then and now.<sup>41</sup> The similarity between judgements about the causes of truancy today and in the past might lead to cynicism about the extent to which the state *can* change the attitudes of those who do not want to conform to society's norms. The £885m spent by the Government between 1997 and 2004 chipping away at the problem seems to suggest as much, although a modest improvement in attendance has been achieved.<sup>42</sup>

The strategies for reducing truancy introduced by LEAs in the past ten years bear some remarkable similarities to those pursued by local authorities a century before. Truancy

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<sup>39</sup> For instance, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/1887463.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/1887463.stm) "Blair warns parents over unruly children", (cited 24.03.2002).

<sup>40</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1878*, xxviii (2048) pp.450-1

<sup>41</sup> Elementary Education Act, 1880 (264) (43 & 44 Vict.); Education Act 1996 Section 7.

<sup>42</sup> NAO, *Improving School Attendance in England*, pp.3-4.

sweeps using police and attendance officers with follow-up by the LEA were commonly undertaken in the 1880s and 90s when the ‘nuisance’ of children at large on the streets first caught the attention of the authorities. As today, the sight of children loitering in the street without useful occupation and not under the supervision of parents suggested the possibility that they may be drawn into anti-social behaviour, petty crime, or be vulnerable to exploitation. The revival of prosecution, fines and even imprisonment for parents suggests even more a return to punitive approaches familiar to nineteenth century enforcement agencies. Today punishment comes as a final strategy after support and help from various agencies of the state to the family concerned. Although local authorities in the past were faced with a bigger absenteeism problem than today and reached for a punitive solution in the absence of welfare support, they too preferred to resolve attendance problems without resort to the courts. They knew just as well as modern local authorities that pursuing parents through the courts was costly, time-consuming and by no means guaranteed to result in a conviction, or a change in behaviour, if a conviction were secured.

Another avenue for dealing with truancy has been pursued via strategies to improve children’s behaviour, their attitudes to school and the curriculum under the Government’s Behaviour and Attendance Strategy, which attracted £331m. of funding from the Department for Education and Skills between 2002-6 and is still ongoing.<sup>43</sup> The rationale for this approach was the evidence, particularly for older pupils, that school-based factors were a significant cause of truancy. It is well-known that schools with a similar intake of pupils can have widely differing attendance rates, which indicates that schools can play a part in reducing truancy. There is evidence that this has always been the case – HMIs in the earliest days of compulsion recommended strategies for teachers to use to increase children’s interest in class and hence their attendance.<sup>44</sup> Reward schemes for good attendance at school became remarkably popular in the early years of the twentieth century – again, these have been revived in schools today to improve attendance.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.6.

<sup>44</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1871* xxii (406) p.225; *Parliamentary Papers 1892*, xxviii (6746-1), p.380.

<sup>45</sup> Reid, "Causes, Views and Traits", p.67.

## **Local government, schooling and welfare present and past**

The story of compulsory attendance also lies at the heart of the development of local education authorities (LEAs) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Only by improving the provision of school buildings and increasing the numbers of qualified teachers were local authorities in the late nineteenth century able to win the commitment of the majority of parents and children to regular attendance at state elementary schools. Attendance monitoring contributed greatly to increasing awareness by middle-class members of school boards and town councils of the shortcomings of many working-class homes and the poor health of children. The introduction of modern LEAs from 1902 signalled a period of investment and commitment to improving elementary education and enforcing attendance consistently in rural and urban areas. In the inter-war period, local authority structures and systems developed to deliver welfare services for children and families. The practical development of services for children stemmed initially from the work of school attendance departments in visiting families and becoming familiar with the conditions of the local community. The grafting of welfare functions onto the work of school attendance departments provoked change in the approach to truanting children and their families. Truancy was seen increasingly as evidence of the need for support, whether social, economic or psychological.

Rapid, indeed hectic, change in schools and local education authorities over the past twenty years has led to the impression that history has little to offer in explaining current problems and concerns. In fact, it can be argued that the educational system we have today could not be more determined by its history. In recent years, it has become commonplace to suggest that local authorities are much diminished in their powers and role in relation to schools and family welfare. Yet local authorities are still responsible for the enforcement of attendance alongside welfare support for families and children. They have a duty to provide the education welfare service for schools. Governments have tended to 'add on' rather than reform and replace – the Behaviour and Attendance Strategy is an example of this. New roles for Behaviour and Attendance Consultants have

been introduced in local authorities to build better communication between schools and the Education Welfare Service and work within the school and with the home to improve attendance.<sup>46</sup> Contradictions between the enforcement of the law on compulsory attendance and the welfare role of supporting families remain a problem, as does the challenge of mediating between schools and ‘hard to reach’ families. The law on compulsory attendance has not changed and it is this which is the anchor on schools’ relationships with parents and children. Children must attend regularly, it is for their and society’s good and somehow all must be persuaded of its benefits. The challenge is no less urgent today than in the past, though circumstances of families and society may have changed.

Establishing the ‘reality behind truanting’ is both challenging yet enticing, to the historian as much as to the present-day educationist. History certainly cannot offer ready-made remedies, though it is all too popular for politicians to return to the policies of their predecessors, especially where the problem of anti-social behaviour is concerned. The difficulty of understanding aberrant child and family behaviour remains – but the way in which it has been treated in the past is an important starting point for understanding why we are where we are today. As E.P. Hennock has remarked, the modern welfare state is largely a product of ‘path dependency’, in which decisions taken in the early twentieth century set in train a course of development remarkably resistant to later reformers.<sup>47</sup> Like the proverbial oil tanker, once set on a particular course, the systems which govern the way services work have been near impossible to change. The systems for dealing with truancy in the past were established within a particular political, social and economic framework and they were much influenced by local circumstances on the ground. This study attempts to chart that ground and show the way in which local authority approaches to combating truancy developed over time. It also attempts to analyse the reasons behind truanting and the behaviour of the families and children concerned, to judge whether their ‘reality’ changed over time or whether the issues in 1939 were essentially the same as in 1880.

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<sup>46</sup> <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/schoolattendance/otherinitiatives/attadvisers.cfm> (cited 16.03.2007).

<sup>47</sup> E.P. Hennock, *The Origin of the Welfare State in England and Germany, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.340.

## Chapter 2 – Historical Perspectives on Truancy and School Attendance

**‘Truancy touches on a sensitive and deeply rooted social nerve, which has its root in the very history and ethos of compulsory state education and its worth.’<sup>48</sup>**

### **Defining the problem of truancy**

Truancy was, and still is, ill-defined – since some absences are condoned, accepted or tolerated by society for particular reasons in particular places. What the authorities today, and those in past, call truancy is simply absence from school that is not acceptable to them.<sup>49</sup>

Local authorities and teachers sometimes distinguished between absences initiated by the child and those known to the parent – the former being truancy and the latter not. However, it was difficult to sustain this distinction, since the parent may simply have condoned the child’s decision not to go to school. Whilst sickness and severe weather conditions were routinely accepted as justifiable causes for missing school, any other type of absence could cause concern – the concern tended to define the problem rather than any strict definition of a child as a truant. Many absences from school were the product of a decision made by the family or the child alone not to attend school for a mixture of ‘justifiable’ and ‘unjustifiable’ reasons. For instance, one study of absences from a Liverpool school attributed to weather conditions found that more than 50% of the absences occurred on Mondays and Fridays – this was unlikely to be the effect of random weather conditions, but rather the reaction to the weather *plus* the prospect of school just after or before the week-end.<sup>50</sup> For this reason, it is not easy to distinguish between truancy and other types of ‘acceptable’ absence.

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<sup>48</sup> Pat Carlen, Denis Gleeson, and Julia Wardhaugh, *Truancy: The Politics of Compulsory Schooling* (Buckingham: OUP, 1992), p.48.

<sup>49</sup> Reid, "Causes, Views and Traits", pp.59-60.

<sup>50</sup> A.C.O. Ellis, "Influences on School Attendance in Victorian England", *British Journal of Educational Studies* 21 (1973), p.321.

Absenteeism has always been a problem for schools. The ragged schools, maintained by charity and brought together under the Ragged School Union in 1844, accepted that the poorest children would attend intermittently and often late, due to the need to work or support the family at home.<sup>51</sup> However, the religious voluntary societies (the National Society and the British and Foreign Schools Society) insisted on punctuality and regular attendance in their schools, and this was reinforced by the introduction of state funding and inspection of schools from the 1830s onwards. All long-term or intermittent absences caused problems for schools in terms of pupil achievement and their reaction was to address the parent – generally by calling the mother into school or visiting at home. Few verbatim records of the interaction between teachers and parents over truanting children survive but those that do exist clearly demonstrate the belief of schools that, once the child had been enrolled, it was the parent's responsibility to get them there each day.<sup>52</sup> The introduction of legal compulsion rested on the same assumption, though now it included those parents with whom the public elementary schools had never had a relationship – those who had sent their children to private working-class schools, whether the smaller dame schools or private adventure schools, and those who had never sent their children to school at all. This added to the school population both children and parents whose expectations and reactions were not conditioned by any choice they had made, or by any valuing of the schooling they were expected to use and pay towards.

Legal compulsion was the responsibility of new local authorities, created by the state to ensure there were sufficient school places to meet the need of every working-class child and to ensure that those places available were used efficiently, that is to say, filled every day on a regular basis. After 1880, all areas had to be covered by local bye-laws requiring regular attendance at elementary school, unless the parent could show their child was being educated to an acceptable standard outside the state system. Truancy was no longer just a nuisance to schools – it was a matter of concern to the state and a 'problem' defined at the local level according to the views of the enforcing authorities. Local authorities

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<sup>51</sup> E.A.G. Clark, "The Last of the Voluntarists: The Ragged School Union in the School Board Era", *History of Education* 11, no. 1 (1982), p.25.

<sup>52</sup> See for instance "Altofts Colliery School Log Book 1872-93", (West Yorkshire Archives, Wakefield WMD4/1), in which the teacher, Albert Mabin, records a twenty-year struggle with absenteeism amongst the children of a South Yorkshire mining community.

alongside schools had to develop systems for ensuring full attendance and penalties for those who did not conform, but they exercised discretion about truancy, how it was defined, who was prosecuted and what penalty was inflicted on them.

### **Working-class reactions to compulsory schooling**

Steve Humphries in his book, *Hooligans or Rebels? An Oral History of Working-Class Childhood and Youth 1889-1939*, presents truancy as one aspect of a pattern of class resistance to compulsory education. According to Humphries, 'Schooling was widely experienced by both children and parents as an oppressive constraint,' and increases in attendance were only achieved after 'a prolonged struggle to overcome the resistance of working-class children and their parents to compulsory attendance.'<sup>53</sup> This is perhaps the most extreme view of working-class reactions to compulsion, set within a broadly Marxist framework of interpretation. Gardner's work, *The Lost Elementary Schools of Victorian England*, celebrates the popularity of the dame and private adventure schools within working-class communities, where they served to accommodate the needs of family life by not demanding punctuality or punishing intermittent attendance. But he also argues that the key attraction of these schools was the fact that they were usually small-scale, run by working-class people, unlike the public elementary schools provided by the middle classes, who expected both deference and gratitude from parents and unquestioning obedience from children.<sup>54</sup> J.S. Hurt neatly captures the mood of sullen acceptance by which he characterises working-class reactions to compulsion, in a chapter entitled 'Unwillingly to school'.<sup>55</sup> Here the working class family is depicted as both instrumental and apathetic, with parents having neither the time nor interest in education beyond the basics for their children. Schooling above that level had little relevance to their children's future lives and prevented their contribution to present family needs. In Hurt's narrative, families were gradually battered into submission by the school, the school attendance officer and the courts. All of these present a negative view of elementary schooling and its reception by working-class communities.

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<sup>53</sup> Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels?* pp.62-3.

<sup>54</sup> Philip Gardner, *The Lost Elementary Schools of Victorian England* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

<sup>55</sup> Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, pp.188-213.

In a riposte to Hurt, Jonathan Rose presents a rosier view of working-class reactions – elementary schooling was largely accepted, and sometimes valued by the majority – and at the very least it was a neutral and could be a beneficial influence on children’s lives, which were hardened by poverty, overcrowded homes, tired parents and the need to go to work at an early age.<sup>56</sup> For Rose, truancy would have to be explained as a product of some particular circumstance in the family or at school or some local cause, rather than a widespread reaction amongst many working-class communities. The first three historians place schooling within a model of class-cultural or even political conflict but Rose presents a working-class with a more nuanced range of attitudes amongst parents.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, it is reasonable to assume a great variety of attitudes to compulsory schooling, from outright opposition, to meek acceptance or eager appreciation of its benefits. All of these attitudes might exist within a set of social and economic circumstances which severely constrained families and the choices they faced for their children.

It is also possible to view working-class reactions to schooling as primarily a product of necessary economic prioritising, whatever the attitudes of parents to schooling. R.D. Anderson has argued that for working-class families, ‘given the pressure of more basic needs, education was a good which they might be forced to sacrifice.’<sup>58</sup> The study of household economics, both historically and in terms of child labour in developing countries, has highlighted the crucial economic determinants of decision-making over children’s schooling. For poor families, it was not possible to take anything other than an instrumental view of schooling – an aspiration perhaps, but not always attainable given the day-to-day exigencies under which they lived. Committing resources to education, at a time when almost all schools charged a fee, was especially difficult as it is a long-term commitment – and the benefits are deferred rather than immediate. By contrast, employment for children in the early and mid-nineteenth century usually produced an instant addition to family finances. Large families where the mother was occupied with

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<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Rose, "Willingly to School: The Working-Class Response to Elementary Education in Britain, 1875-1918", *Journal of British Studies* 32 (1993), pp.114-38.

<sup>57</sup> Rose, *Intellectual Life*, pp.172-82.

<sup>58</sup> Robert D. Anderson, "School Attendance in Nineteenth-Century Scotland: A Reply", *Economic History Review* 38 (2) (1985), p.285.

younger siblings exerted even more pressure on children to choose work over school. For this reason, intermittent schooling for a few years was a common experience of working-class children before the 1870s.<sup>59</sup>

There is little evidence of a growth in demand for schooling from parents during the early industrial revolution as employment opportunities were not obviously enhanced or wages increased via education, even by the possession of basic literacy and numeracy skills.<sup>60</sup> Most working-class parents aspired to a schooling in the basics for their children but there was little to be gained from extending investment beyond reading, writing and arithmetic. In fact, evidence of school duration shows a dip in the years of schooling enjoyed by working-class children from the 1780s to 1850s, a period when opportunities for child labour grew in both new and established sectors of the economy.<sup>61</sup> Economists have demonstrated the way in which saturation of low-skills markets in developing countries pushes down adult wages, forcing families to seek work for their children to maintain the family income. Arguably, this was the situation in England in the early to mid-nineteenth century.<sup>62</sup> Fluctuations in trade also affected the regularity of family income, so the calculation of opportunity costs of an investment in children's schooling would be influenced by caution and short-term considerations. Even when the breadwinner was earning a regular and sufficient income, the long-term investment in schooling might be seen as wasteful, given the periodic insecurity of family income and the lure of plentiful work for children aged 10 or 11 and older. This was particularly the case for poorer families with breadwinners in insecure, casual or unskilled employment, or female-headed families with no sustainable means of support. Early entry to millwork became a family expectation in the textile areas, such as Lancashire and West Yorkshire, reinforced by patterns of behaviour across whole towns. This created a formidable barrier

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<sup>59</sup> Jane Humphries, *Through the Mill: Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008 forthcoming).

<sup>60</sup> David F. Mitch, "Education and Skill of the British Labour Force", in Roderick Floud and Paul A. Johnson (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.345.

<sup>61</sup> Humphries, *Through the Mill*.

<sup>62</sup> Jane Humphries, "Child Labor: Lessons from the Historical Experience of Today's Industrial Economies", *The World Bank Economic Review* 17, no. 2 (2003), pp.183-6.

to regular full-time attendance at school, especially after the age for half-time labour had been attained.<sup>63</sup>

Despite the impression that the industrial revolution was a period of increased opportunity for social and economic mobility, the potential gains for working-class children from a parental investment in their education were likely to be limited, or at least to be perceived as limited, even well into the twentieth century. The father's occupational class exerted a much greater influence on the child's eventual occupation than school attendance and the return to education in terms of eventual adult earnings appears to have been small, compared to current-day estimates.<sup>64</sup> Lowe argues that instead of challenging the constraints of social class, the form of schooling universalised by the state from the 1870s fixed social distinctions and erected even greater barriers to mobility than had been the case in the pre-compulsory days. There was no 'ladder of opportunity' for the vast majority of working-class children before the early twentieth century, and even after that, it was a very narrow 'ladder' for a few able children.<sup>65</sup>

Thus from the parents' point of view, any investment in education in terms of foregone income or additional costs was unlikely to be repaid by children in later life to the family as a whole. Many working-class autobiographies demonstrate the value of the income brought into the home by the older child working when for the first time the contribution might exceed the costs of his or her keep to the family purse.<sup>66</sup> Extending education reduced this contribution and any increased income which did occur was accrued at a later stage in life, when the child was an adult and more likely to be independent. This lack of reward for investment in education by the working-classes affected children as well as parents, in terms of their ambitions and their decisions whether to prioritise

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<sup>63</sup> Malcolm Fielding and Michael Winstanley, "Lancashire children in the nineteenth century", in Michael Winstanley (ed.), *Working Children in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire* (Preston: Lancashire County Books, 1995), pp. 1-24.

<sup>64</sup> Long, *Return to Schooling* (cited). p.17.

<sup>65</sup> Roy Lowe, "Schooling as an Impediment to Social Mobility in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Britain", in Gary McCulloch (ed.), *History of Education Reader* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2005), pp.51-9; Robert D. Anderson, *Education and the Scottish People, 1750-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p.235.

<sup>66</sup> E.g. John Burnett, *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and the Family from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London: Allen Lane, 1982), pp.99, 229-30.

schooling or other family needs, including helping in the home. Children's sense of immediate family need for their labour, whether waged or at home, was sometimes acute and deflected even the ambitions of the most able and willing pupil.<sup>67</sup> These expectations and limitations persisted throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, especially where chronic urban poverty or a strong tradition of child labour remained. In rural areas, parents' and children's horizons were limited, since the vast majority of village-dwellers were agricultural labourers and expected their children to end up working on the land. And even where opportunities for child labour contracted, parents sought other outlets for their children to earn and supplement the family income. Mothers were adept at piecing together several part-time jobs for their children.<sup>68</sup> Such cultural patterns and expectations were likely to linger beyond the imposition of legal restraints on child labour and the enforcement of compulsory attendance at school.

After the introduction of compulsory attendance across the country gradually from 1870-80, there were still powerful incentives to parents to limit their commitment to regular and long-term schooling for their children. Work opportunities for children changed but did not diminish in all areas of the economy. Labour laws covering factories, mines and agriculture reduced their scope for employment, but at the same time, regular 'first' jobs as errand boys, street sellers or general 'helpers' in all types of domestic and commercial businesses in the towns multiplied as the economy grew and passed into the mature industrial phase.<sup>69</sup> Parents' needs for children's income did not decline either, especially as the scope for mothers to work and women's pay generally were often limited. During the depression years of the 1870s and 80s, the pressure to send children to work at the earliest opportunity was greatest for the poorest families, despite the fact that this added to the labour supply and presumably depressed the earnings of some adult workers in a saturated market.

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<sup>67</sup> Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London 1870-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp.163-4; Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels?* pp.59-60.

<sup>68</sup> Humphries, *Through the Mill*, Chapter on Schooling.

<sup>69</sup> Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, p.198; Harry Hendrick, *Images of Youth: Age, Class, and the Male Youth Problem 1880-1920* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), p.45.

The enforcement of compulsory schooling added to the constraints on poor families' incomes and added a further cost in the form of school fees. Szreter's work on fertility shows that it was the *perceived* costs of children which influenced decisions by couples in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. If one applies the same logic to the perceived costs of schooling, then it is likely that some working-class families would feel themselves to be under pressure to flout the law. Secondly, Szreter found that family decisions were made under essentially local conditions. What appeared to be a national trend, was in fact the accumulation of many individual decisions made in the light of personal and local circumstances and influenced by community patterns of behaviour.<sup>70</sup> The decision whether or not to send one's children to school on a regular basis is also susceptible to an analysis along these lines. Although legal compulsion added a national 'pressure' to the calculation of perceived costs, the operation of the law in relation to truancy was patchy and there were a number of loopholes which could be effectively exploited by parents. For this reason, it is plausible to regard the decision about how a child's time might be useful to the family rather than at school as one which was dependent on local circumstances and the perceived costs to the family – both in terms of loss of the child's time and the likelihood of a penalty being enforced.

The calculation made by working-class families could change – and even before 1870, a number of national developments certainly affected it. Firstly, Government intervention in the regulation of child labour removed children or restricted their work in factories – it affected a tiny minority, but established the idea of 'indirect compulsion' because the half-time system of work and schooling was institutionalised in the law. Economic changes to child labour are difficult to pin down because a lot of it was casual, seasonal, temporary and often very local to home, or even in the domestic environment itself. However, some cottage industries declined in the 1870s due to foreign competition – for instance, lace-making and straw-plait in Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire. Other trades were increasingly mechanised, pushing out the sort of low-skill jobs children undertook – these tended to be local effects, and regulation, for instance of agricultural work by

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<sup>70</sup> Simon Szreter, *Fertility, Class and Gender in Britain, 1860-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.514-20.

children, had very little effect on their participation.<sup>71</sup> Schools were more available to the working classes from the 1850s onwards: applications for building grants accelerated – leading to continual complaints to the Education Department by the Treasury. Government grants were almost exclusively given to the church societies and the involvement of state funding led inevitably to a national system of inspection and the setting of standards for achievement in public elementary schools – the notorious ‘payments by results’ system. But the spread of schools actually created its own lobby on behalf of education for the masses and amongst the masses – for the clergy and teachers themselves had a vested interest in getting the children through the door. Keeping them there, however, was a different matter.

All of these factors would have affected working-class families to some extent, but at what point did schooling become more desirable than other options for children’s time? Landes and Salmon showed that compulsion was always introduced *after* the majority of the population was already participating – but that just meant enrolment, not regular attendance.<sup>72</sup> It is likely that by 1870, schooling was seen as a desirable option by many working-class parents and it was also becoming more available. In addition, working-class incomes were generally higher in real terms than they had been over the previous 50 years, so schooling was more affordable to the average family. However, this is a generalisation and community norms, local industrial context and the individual family situation would all be relevant to the decision to send a child to school, as well as the attitudes of the parents to the principle of schooling. Indeed, the popularity of Sunday Schools in areas with ample opportunities for child labour, and the preference shown by many working-class parents for the more flexible regime of the private adventure school, testify to the fact that parents who generally supported the principle of schooling for their children would also retain the option of maximising family income if they could. This does not invalidate the historian’s quest to understand the attitudes of the working-classes

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<sup>71</sup> Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, p.197.

<sup>72</sup> Landes, William M. and Solmon, Lewis C., "Compulsory Schooling Legislation: An Economic Analysis of the Law and Societal Change in the Nineteenth Century", *Journal of Economic History* 32, no. 1 (1972), pp.54-91.

towards state schooling, but it posits a more complex picture of interaction between household circumstances, legal sanctions and parental attitudes.

The impact of compulsion was to demand daily attendance at school and for more years than most children had attended voluntarily. As Anderson has pointed out, the authorities' expectations of parents rose in each decade – whereas the challenge in the decade after 1870 was to get all children enrolled, the 1880s saw a rise in confrontations, often in the magistrate's court, to 'persuade' parents to conform to regular and punctual attendance.<sup>73</sup> Thus we come to the effects of enforcement on parental and child behaviour. Historians tend to present rather an undifferentiated view of the local authorities who had to enforce the law on the ground.<sup>74</sup> However, we need to look carefully at the sort of struggle that went on at local level to see how the agents of the state, the local school boards and school attendance authorities, actually behaved towards parents in terms of enforcing the law and persuading them their children should go to school regularly, and how quickly parents responded both to persuasion and punishment for non-attendance.

### **The state and the child**

The period 1900-14 was a period of significant transition in the conception of the state's role in relation to children and the school was the fulcrum for this change. This applied to attitudes towards children's attendance at school no less than to their health, welfare and the curriculum they were offered. Legislative change at national and local level also exerted a major influence on the way in which attendance was policed from 1904 onwards. At the same time, there was much continuity in personnel at local level, which suggests that individual attitudes were probably slower to change than the bureaucratic systems by which school attendance was monitored and enforced.

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<sup>73</sup> Anderson, "School Attendance", p.285.

<sup>74</sup> Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, p.202; Pamela Horn, *Education in Rural England 1800-1914* (London: Gill and Macmillan, 1978), p.136.

Many historians have put forward the view that new attitudes to childhood and parental responsibilities spread through the population during the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century.<sup>75</sup> Publicity and social action to promote a particular ideal of childhood took place via both voluntary activities and state policies. The new idealised childhood seems to have originated in changes in attitudes to child-rearing amongst the middle classes during the eighteenth century. The belief in a ‘universal norm’ of childhood experience emerged in the writings of Romantics such as Rousseau and Wordsworth. The idea of ‘childhood innocence’ was encouraged by middle-class habits of domesticity which meant parents were more involved in the training and care of their children than in previous centuries. It was thought that children should be sheltered and protected from the adult world, a process characterised by Zelizer as the growing dominance a new view of the child, the ‘priceless child’ – emotionally valuable but economically useless to its parents.<sup>76</sup> This new ideal of childhood was in turn a product of changing household economies and the greater resources, both material and emotional, available to middle-class households to spend on children. ‘The cultural legitimacy of the useful child was dominant in the nineteenth century while in the twentieth, the priceless child became the conventional norm.’<sup>77</sup> She locates the critical changes in child value in the later nineteenth century and the increasing popularity amongst middle class and aspirant working-class families of the ‘domestic ideal’ centred on a non-productive home. The shelter required for this new ‘innocent’ childhood required separation from the adult world, both at home and outside the home – in school rather than at work and sheltered from the worries of adult life. The question in relation to elementary schooling and attendance is to what extent this attitude infiltrated the attitudes of the authorities, both at national and local level and to what extent it was accepted by working-class parents.

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<sup>75</sup> E.g. Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (London: Pimlico Edition, 1996); George K. Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England, 1870-1908* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982); Lloyd de Mause, *The History of Childhood: The Untold Story of Child Abuse* (London: 1974); Linda A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), chap.2.

<sup>76</sup> Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York: 1985), pp.5 and 8.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p.214.

The gradual expulsion of children from wage-earning and the subsequent adoption by the state of the middle-class norms of childhood proceeded from an interaction between class and family structure and the price and value of children. ‘The new normative ideal of the child as an exclusively emotional and affective asset precluded instrumental or fiscal considerations.’<sup>78</sup> Thus ‘child-saving’ campaigners felt entirely justified in arguing for the removal of children from the workplace, despite the cost to poor parents. What had been a matter for private discretion, though often at the sharp end of economic need, now became the concern of public policy, subject to the law and policing. There was a progressive intrusion into the ‘private world’ of family life to secure the ideal of childhood, in however attenuated form, for all children, which is seen in a raft of legislation in the areas of child welfare and employment from the 1889 onwards. This process included ensuring a minimal level of education, health, protection and feeding for the poorest children, as well as their reformation when convicted of juvenile crime. However, the legislation passed also reflected the conflict between continuing regard for the privacy of the family and reluctance to undermine self-reliance by removing the incentive to fathers to provide for the health and welfare of their families. Thus it was both bold in concept and timid in operation, a combination that resulted in patchy implementation at local level, but also in a gradual change in attitudes amongst local authorities. However, the gathering of information about children in schools and the increased employment of professionals to respond to welfare needs created of itself pressure for further changes at local level in attendance monitoring and policies towards truants and their families.

### **Historical accounts of compulsory school attendance**

School attendance appears in numerous histories of education as a side-issue, essential but not central to the theme of developing school provision. Gillian Sutherland, in her detailed study of the process of legislative and administrative change at national level, gives a thorough explanation of government thinking behind compulsion and how the law

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

was implemented at local authority level.<sup>79</sup> Few historians have examined the changes in the role of local government wrought by the responsibilities devolved to them to legislate for and enforce school attendance.<sup>80</sup> Yet the evidence in the following chapters suggests that the new role in enforcing attendance had long-term implications for the interactions of the state with the family at local level and that it created particular forms of relationship and attitudes amongst those involved which have to some extent lasted to the present day.

Historians of childhood, in particular economic historians of child labour, have recognised the role compulsory attendance played as a complementary factor in the decline of children's work. Mitch and Cunningham both ascribe importance to the enforcement of compulsory attendance as a lever for increases in literacy levels and the decline of child labour.<sup>81</sup> Others present the enforcement role as much weaker, a process which was aided by fortunate shifts in the child labour market in the late nineteenth century rather than a positive force for change.<sup>82</sup> Historians of child welfare have referred to the role of school attendance in alerting local authorities and voluntary organisations to the needs of children, whether physical or material, a process which led eventually to the incorporation of welfare services within the local authority in the early twentieth century.<sup>83</sup> Both of these themes are explored in the following chapters.

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<sup>79</sup> Gillian Sutherland, *Policy-Making in Elementary Education, 1870-1895* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp.115-62.

<sup>80</sup> P.H.J.H. Gosden, *The Development of Educational Administration in England and Wales* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), p.21; P.H.J.H. Gosden and P.R. Sharp, *The Development of an Education Service: The West Riding 1889-1974* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1978), p.55 – both books have brief references.

<sup>81</sup> David F. Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England: The Influence of Private Choice and Public Policy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1992), p.190; Hugh Cunningham, "The Decline of Child Labour: Labour Markets and Family Economies in Europe and North America since 1830", *The Economic History Review, New Series* 53, no. 3 (2000), pp.416-7.

<sup>82</sup> Peter Kirby, *Child Labour in Britain, 1750-1870* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.119; Malcolm Fielding and Michael Winstanley, "Lancashire children in the nineteenth century", in Michael Winstanley (ed.), *Working Children in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire* (Preston: Lancashire County Books, 1995), pp. 1-24; Nigel Goose, "Child Employment Prospects in Nineteenth Century Hertfordshire in Perspective: Varieties of Childhood?" (unpublished paper, University of Hertfordshire, 2003), p.16.

<sup>83</sup> George K. Behlmer, *Friends of the Family: The English Home and Its Guardians, 1850-1940* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp.92-104; Harry Hendrick, *Child Welfare: England 1872-1989* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.30-3; Lionel Rose, *The Erosion of Childhood: Child Oppression in Britain 1860-1918* (London: 1991), pp. 189-95.

Two articles, one on England by A.C.O. Ellis, and another on Scotland by Don Witherington, have been published on the causes of truancy in the nineteenth century.<sup>84</sup> The only book devoted wholly to the history of school attendance problems and enforcement is David Rubinstein's *School Attendance in London 1870-1904: A Social History*, published in 1969.<sup>85</sup> Originally conceived as a history of the London School Board, Rubinstein's work stands as a benchmark of traditional social history which brings together all aspects of the social and political background to the enforcement of compulsory school attendance. He manages the difficult trick of sympathising both with the hardships of working-class families and the difficulties faced by the Board in fulfilling their responsibilities. The book stresses the important role enforcement played in improving attendance without minimising the weaknesses of the system and the hindrances faced by the poor in London. A more recent treatment of a similar theme but embracing the whole of childhood experience is Anna Davin's *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London 1870-1914*.<sup>86</sup> The section on school attendance brings together both statistical data and autobiographical evidence to show how attendance improved as attitudes towards school became more positive and as schools themselves became integrated into local communities. Both of these volumes concentrate on London but little has been done to explore the experience of compulsory attendance outside the capital and there are many reasons for thinking London was not entirely typical of the rest of the country. Although many small-scale local studies of school attendance have been published, they are disparate – there has been no attempt to bring them together to present a picture of the process of change in school attendance across different regions of England.<sup>87</sup> Only one study has examined the ways in which provincial local authorities

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<sup>84</sup> Ellis, "Influences on School Attendance in Victorian England", pp.313-26; Donald J. Witherington, "Attitudes to Truancy", *Research Intelligence* 1, no. 2 (1975), pp.20-2.

<sup>85</sup> David Rubinstein, *School Attendance in London 1870-1904: A Social History* (Hull: University of Hull Publications, 1969).

<sup>86</sup> Anna Davin, *Growing up Poor: Home, School and Street in London 1870-1914* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1996).

<sup>87</sup> E.g. W.E. Marsden, "Social Environment, School Attendance and Educational Achievement in a Merseyside Town 1870-1900", in Phillip McCann (ed.), *Popular Education and Socialization in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Methuen, 1977) pp.193-227; Leigh M. Davison, "School Attendance and the School Attendance Committee: The East and North Ridings of Yorkshire, 1876-1880", *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 18, no. 1 (1986), pp.46-54; Leigh M. Davison, "Compulsory Schooling in a Northern City: The Policies of the Hull School Board Regarding School Attendance, 1871-1902", *History of Education Society Bulletin* 39 (1987), pp.32-43; Leigh M. Davison, "School Attendance

tried to reconcile their official task of enforcing the law on compulsory attendance with parental and other local attitudes towards schooling.<sup>88</sup> Chapters 3 and 4 which follow in this study are an attempt to provide a more comprehensive overview of the enforcement of compulsory attendance from 1880-1900, drawn from a variety of local contexts and also to analyse the changing socio-economic context within which school attendance improved. This overview of the period 1880-1900 acts as a foundation for the analysis of change in the twentieth century pursued in Chapters 5 to 7.

Historians of elementary education have given considerable attention to the period from 1870 to 1904, in which the study of school attendance has formed a minor but consistent theme.<sup>89</sup> Some have taken their analysis through to 1914. However, there has been almost no coverage of the period of the First World War – an exception to this is Pamela Horn's *Rural Life in England in the First World War* which includes a chapter on child labour and schooling.<sup>90</sup> For urban contexts in England, there has been no comparable study. Neither has any attention been given to school attendance after 1918 – perhaps on the assumption that it was 'no longer an issue' by that date. This gives the impression that the 'battle' to persuade the working-classes to attend school had been won by the end of the Edwardian period, although Horn and Hurt acknowledge that attendance problems re-appeared during wartime.<sup>91</sup> This study goes beyond previous research in two key ways, firstly by comparing a diverse range of localities outside London, and secondly by extending the period of analysis up to 1939. Chapters 5 to 7 provide the first survey of school attendance issues in the decades before World War Two. The study has been based on analysis of a diverse range of local archives, focusing on the changing role of

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and the Activities of School Attendance Committees in Wales and the South West", *History of Education Society Bulletin* 42 (1988), pp.41-54; Leigh M. Davison, "Enforcing School Attendance in Late Victorian England: An Investigation into the Activities of Rural School Boards in the East Riding of Yorkshire", *Children at Risk: Aspects of Education No 50, Journal of the Institute of Education, The University of Hull* (1994), pp.17-31; Kathleen B. Bailey, "Rural School Boards: A Reappraisal of the Work of the Small School Boards Based on a Buckinghamshire Study", *History of Education Society Bulletin* 28 (1981), pp.24-37.

<sup>88</sup> Grace M. Belfiore, "Family Strategies in 3 Essex Textile Towns 1860-1895: The Challenge of Compulsory Elementary Schooling" (unpublished DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 1986).

<sup>89</sup> Anderson, *Education and the Scottish*, pp.229-36; Horn, *Rural England*, pp.134-40, 266-70; Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, pp.188-213.

<sup>90</sup> Pamela Horn, *Rural Life in England in the First World War* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1984), pp.162-82..

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p.162; Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, pp.212-3.

local government attendance departments within the growing welfare agenda. Raising school attendance was not such a central focus for local authorities after 1918, but they did have to continue to deal with the problem of truancy and non-attendance in elementary schools. In some respects they found it more of a struggle to reduce truancy and non-attendance after 1918 and this provoked some local authorities to alter the way they dealt with truanting children and their families in the inter-war period. By continuing to 1939, this study also explains the way in which attendance monitoring contributed to the bigger story of child welfare under the aegis of local authorities in the inter-war period and highlights the extent to which it did not quite fit in with the emerging philosophy of the welfare agenda. This research raises further questions about the monitoring of the family, the ways in which the state tried to change ‘deviant’ behaviour, and the ‘mixed economy’ of child welfare provision in that period, for which there is insufficient space and time in one thesis.

### **Sources and methodology**

Primary sources have formed the bedrock of the current study, supported by occasional secondary works which have added local detail.<sup>92</sup> Most of the primary sources used were official ones, that is to say, the minutes and other records produced by school boards and attendance committees for the period up to 1904 and modern local education authorities after that date. At an early stage, a decision was made not to make significant use of school log books, except to illustrate something already evidenced in the other records. This was because the attendance of particular schools could vary for many reasons peculiar to that school or local area, whereas the aim of the study was to analyse attendance problems across whole communities and examine the ways in which the authority which held the prime responsibility for legal enforcement did its job. This is not to say schools did not play an important role – in fact, it is because of the ‘school factor’

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<sup>92</sup> E.g. John Prest, *The Industrial Revolution in Coventry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960); Pamela Horn (ed.), *Oxfordshire Village Life: The Diaries of George James Dew (1846-1928) Relieving Officer* (Abingdon: Beacon Publications, 1983); C.Violet Butler, *Social Conditions in Oxford* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1912).

that the town-wide or county-wide approach has been adopted, as this was most likely to iron out any variations due to particular schools' effects on their pupils' attendance.

To be able to draw generalised conclusions it has been necessary to use a wide sample of sources. However, the survival of records is patchy and this has resulted in a 'patchwork' approach to the research with records drawn from different places at different times. Nonetheless, the sources used have been carefully balanced to reflect a range of different local socio-economic contexts, including the textile districts of West Yorkshire, the industrial Midlands, ancient county towns, rural areas and the seaside. The main sources have been drawn from Bradford, Buckinghamshire, Coventry, Hastings, Huddersfield, Keighley, Leicester, Oxford and Oxfordshire, plus additional material from Birmingham, Leeds, Leicestershire, Shrewsbury and York (a full list of primary sources is included in the bibliography). Evidence from the West Riding has been included because its child labour conditions provided a significant contrast to other areas included. However, the choice of location was also constrained by what had survived and also the level of detail in the sources available. About some records, great hopes were entertained and then dashed – the missing Leicestershire LEA's minutes for 1906-21 (presumed lost in the 1974 transfer of authorities) represent a real loss since the Director of Education at the time was the progressive William Brockington. Similarly frustrating was the lack of minutes from the Oxford School Board (seemingly also lost in the mid-1970s) but their annual reports were highly informative on the subject of school attendance. In general, the larger the authority, the less could be learned from its records, since large authorities tended to formalise their minutes more than smaller ones. The hand-written records of Victorian school attendance committees, often including the actual words of members and the parents who stood before them, were the most revealing sources and are a testimony to the standard of Victorian clerking (often by a local solicitor) even in smaller towns. The printed records of metropolitan authorities, such as Birmingham, were much more standardised and therefore gave away little of the actual discussion which took place over the cases they examined.

Official sources like minutes and the data collected on school attendance tended to exhibit consistency in terms of their focus and format. This has been especially useful in relation to attendance data, since it has been possible to establish accurate comparisons between absentee rates in different locations. Local authorities adopted their own formats in the early 1870s, but were also seeking to standardise their approach. The adoption of a Departmental format for the compilation of monthly statistics from 1876 onwards improved comparability and also forced one or two authorities to revise their recorded levels of attendance downwards.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, the impact of the law meant that there was a consistent framework of activity, by elected or appointed members of attendance committees and by school attendance officers and others involved in the work of enforcement and welfare. Local variations in practice and decisions over particular issues, such as the use of residential institutions for truants or the awarding of fee support to parents, therefore stood out more and demanded comment.

The comparative analysis of attendance data collected from different local authority records raises the question of just how trustworthy the records of attendance were. It has been argued that English attendance records were more suspect than those of teachers in other countries, because of the incentive under the Code after 1862 to maximise attendance and thus influence the annual grant from the Department.<sup>94</sup> Admittedly, there would have been some inducement to do this, and schools were known to ‘leave the register open’ beyond the stipulated time of 9.30 am in order to count late-comers. This was much more likely in small, one-teacher schools than in larger urban ones, where the constraints of ‘colleague supervision’ and the headteacher’s control were greater. Moreover, falsification of registers was taken very seriously by local authorities and by inspectors, who were responsible for checking the accuracy of record-keeping in the school at their annual visit.<sup>95</sup> Another factor pointing to fairly accurate registration of attendance by teachers is the consistency of the trend in attendance over time and across communities. Even if a particular school had been understating the level of absenteeism,

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<sup>93</sup> E.g. Oxford School Board OSB *Annual Report 1876*.

<sup>94</sup> Ben Eklof, *Russian Peasant Schools: Officialdom, Village Culture and Popular Pedagogy, 1861-1914* (London: University of California Press, 1986), p.323.

<sup>95</sup> Rubinstein, *School Attendance*, p.111 notes the seriousness with which falsification of registers was treated.

that would not have affected the statistics of a whole town, or if it were so blatant that it was out of keeping with the known background of the school, then it should have been obvious to the school attendance committee or local authority. Did local authorities also have an incentive to cheat? Patently, they were being held accountable for attendance levels in their area, however they had no reason to collude with schools and perhaps much to gain from putting pressure on the poor performers. The revisions required after 1876 show that early recording was less accurate, but this was likely to be the result of schools not sending in figures regularly, a common complaint. The transfer of responsibility for attendance to LEAs from 1902 resulted in no major adjustments to reported attendance levels, which might have been expected if previous authorities had been recording the data inaccurately. Copious statistical data is available on school attendance for the period 1879-1913 with county figures for the period up to 1902 and figures for county boroughs as well for 1902-13. From 1918-38, the Board of Education published only overall national figures. Many urban local authorities also recorded their attendance figures in their meeting minutes – some with very detailed analysis, like the Oxford and Bradford School Boards. Others, like the Coventry School Board, recorded only occasional figures for overall attendance rates. Likewise some authorities officially recorded detailed prosecution data and information about the enforcement process, showing how many visits had been made by their attendance officers, how many children returned to school, etc. Such records proved invaluable where they have survived and were particularly important in revealing local trends in enforcement activity.

Although the primary aim of the thesis has been to analyse the policies and procedures of local authorities, the causes of non-attendance and changes to them have also been a focus for attention. Even though the main sources used were official ones and very much ‘sources from above’, they do give some insight into the changing patterns of family behaviour. There is a lack of first-hand evidence from parents and children about the reasons for their absences from school, and as Bellefiore has pointed out, parents learned which reasons were more ‘acceptable’ to the members of attendance committees and adjusted their excuses accordingly, so ‘reasons given’ were not necessarily the real causes of absence. Only rarely were parents’ voices recorded in the minutes and never

children's, so it is difficult to reconstruct the reality of a truant and his or her family at whatever period. For the most part, these voices have been lost, and not only for the early part of the period. Theoretically, oral history provides a way in to discussing the reasons for truanting in the past, but this may have depended on the emotional impact of recalling truanting behaviour and its effects. Steve Humphries' interviewees took a rather 'cheeky' view of their misbehaviour, and this is how truancy was often presented – boys playing, having a lark and skiving off for a day or two.<sup>96</sup> Children who were persistently 'at odds' with the system of schooling or who were singled out in any way, for instance by being sent to reformatories or industrial schools, might be less likely to want to dwell on their negative childhood experiences even in old age. In 1976, a Liverpool newspaper searched for former pupils of the day industrial schools which had existed in the city. Despite a well-publicised call, only one response was received, and this was not from a former pupil, but the sister of one.<sup>97</sup> The shame felt by children consigned to such establishments must have lingered on into adult life and would not be gladly recalled or shared with the world, even decades later.

One unique source came to light in Coventry Archives which has been used as the basis for an alternative approach to this problem of lack of sources about the families and children involved in truancy. The Coventry Summons Book provided evidence of 3,000 truanting children and their families over a twenty-five year period from 1874-99. The source is a hand-written list of families prosecuted for non-attendance. The detailed personal information in the source, names, addresses, occupational data and children's ages could be cross-referenced for a sample of the families to the two censuses for 1881 and 1891. However, since the source runs to more than 80 pages, this could not have been done in the Archives itself. The pages were photographed, allowing the digital images to be enlarged for easier reading on the computer and cross-referenced for further information using an online census website. Such an exercise would scarcely have been possible ten years ago without an investment of time beyond the capacity of a doctoral researcher – a final 'mopping up' exercise using the census microfiches at Coventry

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<sup>96</sup> Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels?* pp.62-4.

<sup>97</sup> F.B. Harris, "The School Board Day Industrial Schools" (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Liverpool, 1987), p.287.

Library to search for information on 8 families took a whole morning. However, each family 'reconstructed' via the online census took on average 3-4 minutes. As far as was possible from the census data, the 'reality' of the family lives of these truants was reconstructed – the question of interest was whether they shared characteristics which might indicate particularly the socio-economic or familial reasons for the child's truanting from school. There was no equivalent source for the twentieth century but the issues of motivation and causes of truancy at the end of the period were revisited via the evidence contained in a medical study undertaken in the late 1940s. This has allowed some tentative conclusions about the extent of change in truancy over the period and the critical factors which affected its incidence.

### **Themes of the thesis**

The following chapters 3-7 focus on the evidence about the treatment and causes of truancy in the period 1880-1939 with conclusions in chapter 8. The thesis is arranged chronologically in two periods, 1880-1900 (covered in chapters 3 and 4) and 1900-39 (covered in chapters 5, 6 and 7). There are a number of themes which run through the whole thesis. There is an examination of legal changes and the trends in absenteeism and prosecution in each chapter. The contrast between urban and rural enforcement is also followed throughout the thesis. The growing role of the state in relation to the family and the power relations inherent in that role form an important undercurrent to all the analysis. The thesis also shows how changes took place in local authority attitudes towards truants and their families, and why new ideas were taken up, especially in the period just after the First World War.

### Chapter 3 : The State and the Family – School Attendance and Truancy 1880-1900

**‘There is an extraordinary divergence in the views of the local authorities as to the value of education.... The standards now fixed by bye-laws do not vary in proportion to the intelligence of the children of the District, but in proportion to that of the local authorities.’<sup>98</sup>**

#### **Introduction**

In the two decades after 1880, the annual attendance rate at elementary school increased by 12.3% and by the end of the period an extra 2 million children were on the registers of the nation’s elementary schools. This change was the product of many factors, not least of which was a considerable improvement in the standard and accessibility of elementary school provision. However, both governments and local authorities believed that enforcement was an important factor in ensuring that attendance at school increased and became more regular. The series of laws relating to attendance and school leaving passed between 1870 and 1899 established national minimum requirements between the ages of 5 and 13, but with much flexibility for local authorities to set leaving ages and allow early exemption from schooling for work (see Appendix A, page 280 below). Local priorities therefore had considerable influence over the length of children’s schooling and also over its regularity, since the enforcement of attendance was dependent mainly on the resources and commitment of the local authority.

There were many obstacles to effective enforcement at the local level. The resources available varied considerably, with urban areas burdened by greater challenges but also in possession of serious spending power from the rates. The patchwork of bye-laws relating to school attendance and child labour was mirrored across the country in a varied series of local arrangements for policing school attendance. There were significant differences in the challenges facing urban and rural local authorities, but the difference between individual urban areas could be very great as well, depending on the local social,

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<sup>98</sup> Gertrude Tuckwell, *The State and Its Children* (London: Methuen, 1894), p.155.

economic and cultural influences on parents, children, employers, and schools. The configuration of school provision was also a significant influence on the capacity of the enforcement machinery to tackle truancy – the lack of sufficient places initially proved an obstacle and in some places overcrowding continued due to the inadequacy of existing buildings and population increase.<sup>99</sup> Long-term problems were caused by the unwillingness of some schools to enrol the very poorest children, or known truants.<sup>100</sup> At a mundane level, the efficiency of communication between schools and the local authority and the level of determination of the members and their attendance officers to enforce attendance vigorously could have a significant effect. For smaller local authorities, their ability to pursue persistent absentees and their parents as far as the courts was sometimes severely affected by the money available for enforcement. The process of pursuing a truant from the first visit to home to a successful court prosecution was often tortuous but some authorities effectively improved attendance by a mixture of sheer dogged persistence and an effective use of their limited resources and powers.

The commitment of local authorities to enforcing regular attendance also varied greatly; in urban areas where there was little in the way of child employment, fear about idle or delinquent children on the streets provided a powerful motivation for the enforcement of school attendance.<sup>101</sup> Where opportunities for child labour were plentiful, there were countervailing arguments about the value of a child's income to the family and the needs of employers.<sup>102</sup> Enthusiasm for enforcement in such circumstances arose more from humanitarian sentiments and a belief in the intrinsic value of elementary education. In rural areas, there was little fear of delinquency and wariness about educating the children of the poor. The resources available were often meagre as well.<sup>103</sup> The legal enforcement of school attendance also brought face to face the different economic, cultural and even moral worlds in which the middle and working classes of Victorian society lived.<sup>104</sup> A meeting with the parents of truants was one of the relatively few occasions for interaction

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<sup>99</sup> Coventry School Board CoSB *Minutes* 6.1.1881, 28.6.1883, 5.2.1885, 29.1.1891, 11.5.1891.

<sup>100</sup> York School Attendance Committee YSAC *Minutes* 23.4.1877, 29.11.1878, 23.10.1890.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* 17.8.1877.

<sup>102</sup> Bradford School Board Attendance Committee BradSBAC *Minutes* 13.1.1880.

<sup>103</sup> Horn, *Rural England*, p.269.

<sup>104</sup> Reynolds, Woolley, and Woolley, *Seems So!* pp.40-3.

between middle-class members of local authorities and working-class families, in the urban context at least. Sometimes this contact was a meeting point of understanding about the pressures on working-class family life. But more commonly it was a situation in which the different priorities of each class and the pressures on the participants were evident.<sup>105</sup> The relative difficulty of making aberrant working-class families conform to respectable norms for the schooling of their children produced frustration for middle-class members of attendance committees and school boards. The parents interviewed often had a different set of concerns in mind at the interviews, however much they agreed that their child should attend school. These different viewpoints reflected the relative value placed on schooling by parents and local authorities, a value which rested on particular family circumstances, opportunities for child labour in the local economy and on local cultural and community expectations.

The process of pressure, persuasion and pragmatic negotiation which local authorities developed in their relations with working-class families had a wider significance in the development of the role of the state at local level. The need to trace and track children's attendance prompted the creation of detailed records on families, initially in the form of the personal knowledge accumulated by school attendance officers, but subsequently in the form of paper records of families' circumstances, streets and neighbourhoods and the schools which served them.<sup>106</sup> This surveillance was only one aspect of the growing formal role of the school attendance department in the monitoring of working-class families. Meetings and reports on cases of truancy alerted the members of attendance committees and school boards to the social problems, poverty, overcrowding and disease of working-class districts as well as the moral failings of some families. They became aware of the structural issues at the root of child poverty as well as the moral ones. In extreme cases, of neglect, homelessness or moral danger, some local authorities acted with a sense of mission to remove children into institutions away from what they saw as

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<sup>105</sup> David Rubinstein, "Socialization and the London School Board 1870-1904: Aims, Methods and Public Opinion", in Phillip McCann (ed.), *Popular Education and Socialization in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Methuen, 1977), p.246.

<sup>106</sup> Birmingham Education Committee BEC, *School Attendance Officers' Census Books 1907-39* (Birmingham City Archives) are a good example of a complete set of records.

pernicious home environments. Thus school boards and attendance committees took the first steps in developing the state's role in the public care of children.

### **Government policy on compulsory schooling and attendance**

To what extent did central government set the parameters for compulsory attendance and support enforcement at local level? The role of central government in the provision of mass education has been portrayed as 'enabling', providing the legislative framework and funding for local efforts through voluntary organisations or local authorities.<sup>107</sup> Initially, there were considerable obstacles to the enforcement of school attendance, whether from attitudes generally towards intervention in the family, or from the practical difficulties surrounding the implementation of mass elementary education. The preference for local responsibility tended to reinforce local differences in the enforcement of attendance and reduced the possibility of a consistent approach. Despite expressing frustration with progress on attendance, the Education Department acted as a passive commentator and even on occasion a brake on efforts to ensure consistent enforcement. Despite urging local authorities to improve attendance in schools, civil servants and ministers did nothing to resolve anomalies between the child labour laws and education acts. Departmental advice was often ad hoc and offered little in the way of active support to those authorities keen to act against parents who ignored the law.

Prior to the passing of the 1870 Elementary Education Act, Forster acknowledged that legal sanctions would be necessary to ensure all working-class parents took advantage of the state's provision.<sup>108</sup> However, it was a decade after 1870 before the whole country was covered by compulsory attendance bye-laws and the eventual legislative framework was both confusing to interpret and compromised in its enforcement.<sup>109</sup> Policy on the working of the law on school attendance was slow to develop. Though the Department recognised the need to ensure regular attendance if state funding of places were to be

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<sup>107</sup> Geoffrey B.A.M. Finlayson, *Citizen, State and Social Welfare in Britain, 1830-1990* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p.83-7.

<sup>108</sup> Sutherland, *Policy-Making*, p.119-20.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.153-7.

justified to the Treasury, there remained a strong feeling that parental rights and responsibilities would be impugned by an explicit legal compulsion, particularly if it emanated from the centre. This reflected a wider view in society that the family was a private sphere under the headship of the father and that the state should not presume to intervene between parent and child.<sup>110</sup> Politicians and civil servants also knew that compulsion could not be practically enforced for some years after 1870 as there were insufficient school places available, especially in the larger cities and industrial towns. It would make a mockery of the law if local authorities attempted to enforce attendance before sufficient schools had been provided for working-class children in the locality.<sup>111</sup> In addition, the Department's chief concern initially was to get unsupervised children off the streets and into school in London and other large cities. Active enforcement of attendance did begin in the early 1870s in these areas and this started to address the fears of delinquency and the uneducated masses which were an undercurrent in the implementation of mass state education.<sup>112</sup> Action to compel attendance in other areas was therefore seen as important but less urgent.

The decision to leave local authorities to implement compulsory school attendance via bye-laws indicated a long-standing preference by Victorian governments for local responsibility in the administration of services. Local initiative had been the pattern for other 'social issues' such as public health and the poor law – and education policy sought where possible to attach new responsibilities to established structures.<sup>113</sup> Where school boards had been introduced under the 1870 Act to provide new schools, they controlled the board schools and had the power to pass bye-laws on attendance covering all public elementary schools funded by the state in their area. In areas where the voluntary societies had made adequate provision for school places through church schools there was no administrative structure to oversee attendance. For this reason, the 1876 Sandon Act, designed to 'fill the gap' in terms of compelling school attendance, located

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p.122.

<sup>111</sup> For instance, in 1872 the Huddersfield School Board proposed building 13 new schools to address a shortfall of 5,500 places in their area - see Huddersfield School Board HuSB *Minutes* 22.5.1872; in London, the School Board provided 260,000 from 1871-81 - see Rubinstein, *School Attendance*, p.22.

<sup>112</sup> Rubinstein, *School Attendance*, p.35.

<sup>113</sup> Philip Harling, *The Modern British State: An Historical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), pp.109-10.

responsibility for oversight with an attendance committee formed from the local Poor Law guardians or town councillors. However, these school attendance committees had no direct control over the schools in their area and very limited resources for enforcing attendance. It was a classic compromise to appease two powerful local lobbies - ratepayers who opposed paying for board schools and the voluntary church societies, who feared competition from those same rate-funded 'secular' schools.<sup>114</sup>

Permissive legislation had been the pattern for dealing with other social issues, and both the 1870 and 1876 Education Acts permitted school boards and attendance committees to pass bye-laws – they were not obliged to do so and many of them, particularly in rural areas, chose not to. The result was that anomalies and inconsistencies in the application of compulsory attendance continued. In its 1878 Annual Report, the Education Department reiterated a common theme of frustration, yet misplaced optimism that progress would be made on a voluntary basis.

Much, it is plain, remains to be done to secure the regular attendance at school of a large number of children who ought to be, but are not, *daily* under instruction...(there follows an analysis of the figures by age)... We have still to call attention to the large number of children who are not known to be attending efficient schools; the small proportion of scholars who attend with regularity; and the meagre nature of the results attained by many of the scholars examined.... The enforcement of early and regular attendance at school by the local authorities whose byelaws are spreading so rapidly ... in the urban and rural districts ... will, we trust, ere many years have passed, effect a still more marked improvement in this respect than has yet been realised throughout the country generally.<sup>115</sup>

This was wishful thinking dressed up as a strategy. It could be argued that the Department was just recognising the fact that public opinion must be allowed to 'catch up' and it was simply pragmatic to wait until local authorities were ready to act. However, it was also clear by 1880 that the permissive approach had resulted in a mess of inconsistencies, particularly in terms of school leaving and the requirements to go half-time. The Department estimated that 72% of the population was covered by bye-laws, but the existence of areas without compulsion was anomalous and undermined the attempts of some local authorities to enforce their bye-laws, whilst neighbouring ones did not even

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<sup>114</sup> Sutherland, *Policy-Making*, p.133.

<sup>115</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1878-9*, xxiii (2342), pp.13-14.

possess them. Pressure had been building up following the 1876 Act, which had failed to satisfy those politicians strongly in favour of compulsion. HMIs complained constantly about the problems of attendance in their annual reports.<sup>116</sup> Lobbying by school managers, teachers and clergy for a more forceful approach from the centre added to pressure for a more consistent approach.<sup>117</sup> This was because attendance and performance in exams heavily influenced the government grant, which had become much more significant in schools' incomes, both in the rural areas, where contributions were affected by the agricultural depression from the mid-1870s and in the towns, where voluntary and board schools competed for pupils.<sup>118</sup>

The 1880 Act has been applauded as 'a decisive step towards the central control of education' by ensuring that all areas were covered by compulsory attendance bye-laws.<sup>119</sup> Mundella's Act sprang partly from his own knowledge of elementary schools in Saxony and established the legislative framework for compulsory attendance into the twentieth century. It ensured that attendance bye-laws took precedence over factory and workshops legislation where these allowed children to leave school early for work. It also allowed local authorities to choose prosecution under their own bye-laws or sections 11 or 12 of the 1876 Act.<sup>120</sup> However, it did not clear up anomalies relating to early leaving because each local authority set its own standards for the award of exemption certificates and decided whether to allow half-time working or not. Neither was the existence of bye-laws any guarantee of effective enforcement, as the initiative for prosecution was left entirely in the hands of local authorities and magistrates, who varied greatly in their practice.

In the longer term, there were crucial weaknesses in the operation of the law and its penalties for non-attendance, which helped to undermine the punitive effects of prosecution and enforcement in the courts. Firstly, smaller local authorities faced the problem of costs of court cases, exemplified by the case of Drayton Parslow School

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<sup>116</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1878*, xxviii (2048), pp. 450-1, 462, 487, 513.

<sup>117</sup> Sutherland, *Policy-Making*, p.129.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p.153.

<sup>119</sup> Kathleen B. Bailey, "The Effects of the 1870 Education Act Upon the Development of Elementary Education in Buckinghamshire" (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Reading, 1979), p.288.

<sup>120</sup> Sutherland, *Policy-Making*, p.153.

Board, a small Buckinghamshire board which ended up with costs amounting to a fifth of its annual rate income after taking 11 parents to court for non-attendance. The consequent complaint from Drayton Parslow School Board reached Mundella with a note from Cumin, the Permanent Secretary stating, 'No wonder Local Authorities are reluctant to enforce Bye-laws'.<sup>121</sup> The second major weakness lay in the level of fines available to the court – the maximum being 5 shillings. This was not high enough to deter parents, when a typical week's wage for a child was about 5 shillings and it could take 6 weeks to bring a case to court. Arrears of payment of fines became an irritating problem for local authorities. The remedies in law against non-payment were limited and could leave the authority bringing the case with extra costs of enforcement where a distress warrant was involved.<sup>122</sup> A complaint by the London School Board illustrated the weaknesses of the process and the Education Department, when made aware of them, could do nothing to influence the Home Office or the operation of the magistrates' courts.<sup>123</sup> Many local authorities believed that the biggest obstacle to the enforcement of bye-laws lay in the attitudes of individual magistrates over their interpretation of the law and their imposition of low fines, often one shilling for first offenders. The model bye-laws formulated by the Department and in wide use in many parts of the country after 1880 were themselves open to interpretation in court. One or two imprecise phrases could be exploited by those eager to evade compulsory attendance in favour of child labour. The key 'weasel words' related to the excuses allowed for non-attendance at school, for instance over what represented a 'reasonable excuse' by a parent for his child's non-attendance.<sup>124</sup> Another contentious clause allowed exemption from school at age 10 where a child was 'beneficially and necessarily employed', a phrase open to a wide interpretation by both parents and magistrates. In Bradford, where worsted mills provided a ready employment market for children, the local authority found itself under constant pressure to allow early leaving. Parents were exploiting the opportunity for children to leave early under the Factory Acts without gaining the permission of the School Board and a court case against

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<sup>121</sup> Bailey, "The Effects of the 1870 Education Act in Buckinghamshire", p.298; Davison, "Enforcing School Attendance in the East Riding of Yorkshire", pp.22-3; BuSAC *Bucks Minutes* 16.2.1889, 24.12.1896.

<sup>122</sup> CoSB *Mins.* 19.1.1882 statement by the Board opposing the use of distress warrants instead of imprisonment for non-payment of a fine.

<sup>123</sup> Sutherland, *Policy-Making*, p.159.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p.157.

one parent exposed the ineffectual nature of this phrase, as the court absolved the parent from seeking the school board's consent to the child's employment. When the Board complained to the Department, they were advised to accept the judgement. The lack of support rankled with the members of the Board; they made their feelings evident in a pointed criticism of the Education Department in their Triennial Report for 1885.<sup>125</sup>

The Department did nothing to clear up these legal anomalies and relied on admonition rather than action in response to complaints from local authorities. This meant there was less chance of a consistent and organised effort to improve attendance at local level. The Department's approach was also part of a general long-term policy of decentralisation designed to push financial responsibility down to local level as court cases had to be funded from rate income.<sup>126</sup> The Department found its relationship with school boards occasionally tense and often abrasive. At one extreme, the large metropolitan boards, elected in their own right and in command of significant resources, expected the active support of the Department for an uncompromising approach to attendance, which was not always forthcoming.<sup>127</sup> In particular, they felt unsupported over the reluctance of the magistracy to convict or punish parents taken to court for the non-attendance of their children. Here the Department faced its own impotence, as it could do nothing to force magistrates, who were supposedly subject to Home Office influence, to support the work of the enforcement agencies. At the other extreme, the Department was well aware of the apathy and inactivity of many small school boards and rural attendance committees, yet it had no effective sanction to force these bodies to commit time and resources to ensuring attendance improved in the schools in their area. Ministers and civil servants were fully aware of the practical limits of Departmental power in its relationship with the fledgling local authorities and the justice system. Sutherland quotes a comment by Cumin to the Cross Commission of 1888, 'I do not know what you can do; you can only wait until the

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<sup>125</sup> Bradford School Board *BradSB Triennial Reports 1883-5*.

<sup>126</sup> Sutherland, *Policy-Making*, p.94-5.

<sup>127</sup> For instance, Leeds School Board *LSB Year Books Report for 1884* shows the Leeds School Board employed 15 attendance officers, a police officer, an Inspector of Attendance Officers and a clerk in its school attendance office.

locality is of a different opinion. You cannot enforce the law when you have to deal with a very recalcitrant body of people.’<sup>128</sup>

Contacts with school boards and attendance committees therefore tended to be ad hoc, in response to specific issues referred to the Department’s officials. Regular circulars were sent out to advise them on the operation of the law, but there were no official guidelines for local authorities on when and how to prosecute parents for non-attendance, and we have to infer much of the policy from communications between the local areas and the centre.<sup>129</sup> Correspondence with local authorities formed a growing portion of the work of the Department after 1876 and increasingly so as educational legislation built up. There was usually some minimal standard implied in the advice given. For instance, the Department queried and sometimes rejected bye-laws sent for approval when the examination standards required for children to leave school early for work were considered to be too low. The Department was especially opposed to any proposal to lower standards for exemption in existing bye-laws.<sup>130</sup> On the other hand, they consistently ignored pleas by many local authorities to require all dame and private adventure schools to seek government certification. These were schools for working-class children which relied on fees and received no government funds, but a significant minority of working-class parents preferred to send their children to them. According to local authorities, such schools did not monitor regular attendance or punctuality and allowed parents to avoid the attentions of the school attendance officer.<sup>131</sup> Action to suppress the schools would have involved a breach of the rights of private enterprise – and of course, middle-class children went to schools outside the publicly-funded system as well so it would have been difficult to distinguish between one type of private school and another, however clear the distinction was to the social observer.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Sutherland, *Policy-Making*, p.161.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p.161.

<sup>130</sup> e.g. BradSBAC *Minutes* 31.1.1880, 24.2.1880; Bicester School Attendance Committee BiSAC *Minutes* 7.11.1884; Keighley School Board KSB School Management and Attendance Committee *Minutes* 1878-81 and 1881-4 show that the Department was willing to agree compromise exemption standards.

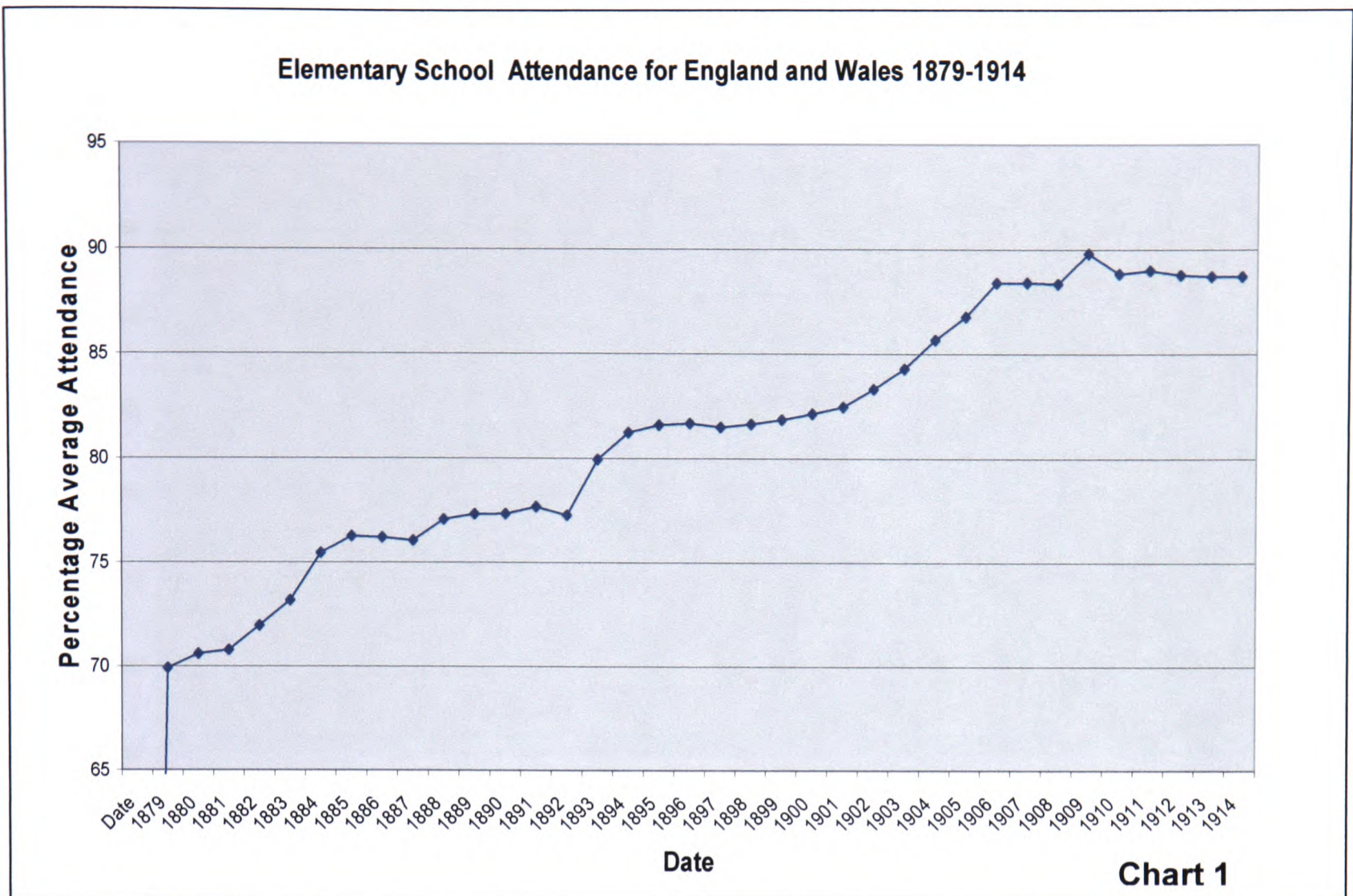
<sup>131</sup> HMIs were vocal critics of these schools, e.g. HMI French to the York School Attendance Committee YSAC *Mins.* 26.4.1887.

<sup>132</sup> Gardner, *Lost Elementary Schools*, pp.202-3.

In summary, the Department gave no strong lead in terms of prompting or supporting local authorities to act against truants and their parents in cases of non-attendance. Instead, it adopted a 'safety net' approach, picking up on those authorities, often in rural areas, which were slow to introduce bye-laws or failed to mount prosecutions. The law, although establishing minimum requirements, permitted inconsistencies and loopholes which parents and children could exploit. This meant that the success or failure of the enforcement of school attendance was dependent almost completely on local initiative and local resources and the response of families in each locality to the bye-laws. Any answer to the question of how and why working-class families did or did not comply with the law on compulsory school attendance lies in an analysis of the local situation and the actual implementation of the law on the ground.

### **Patterns of attendance and prosecutions for truancy**

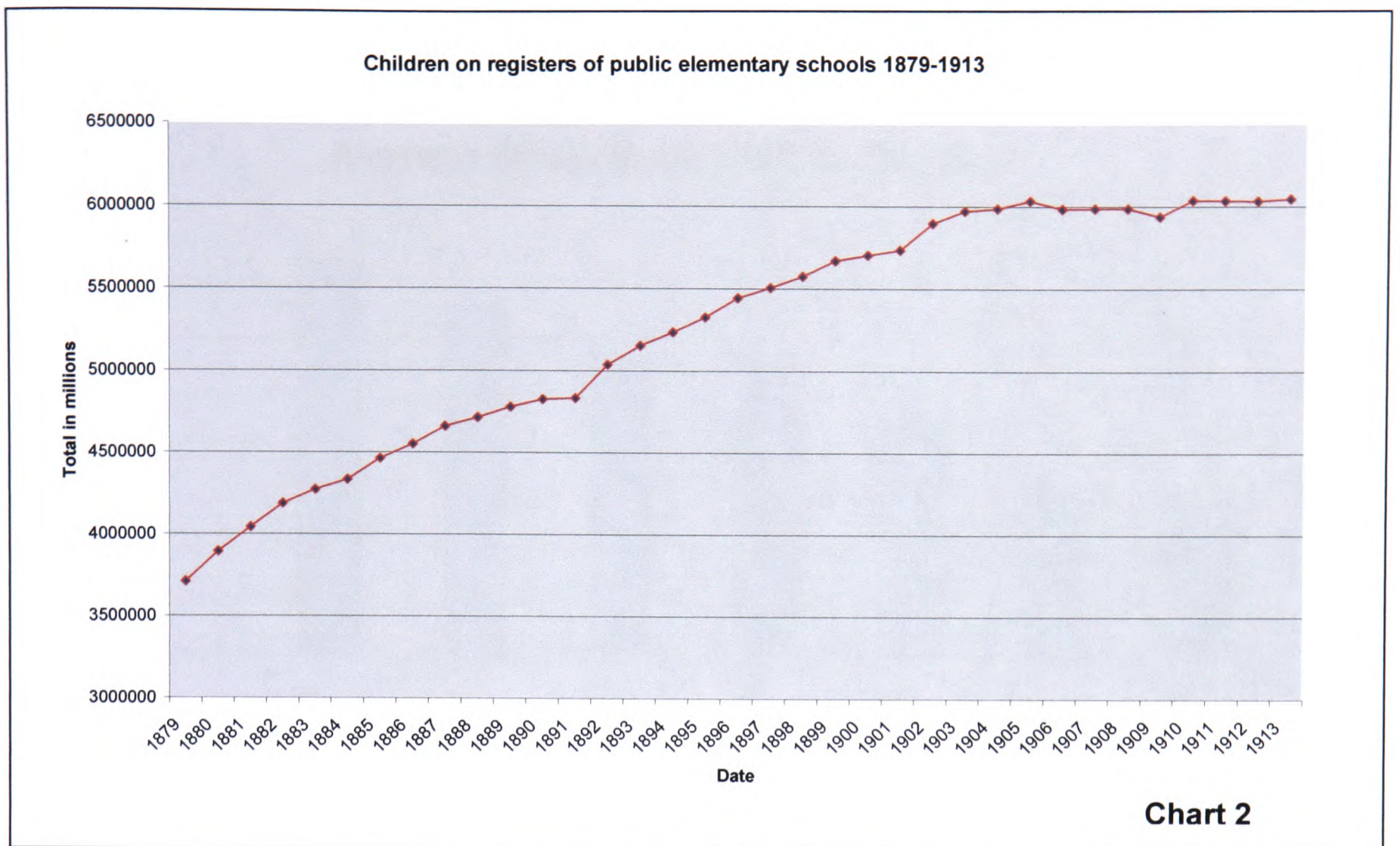
What was the 'size' of the problem of absenteeism from school in the period 1880-1900? The published statistics for elementary school attendance available for England and Wales were based on 'average annual attendance' (see Appendix B). Even if one doubts the absolute reliability of teachers' recording of attendance, especially in small rural schools, the trends in the data are indisputable. Chart 1 overleaf shows the trend in annual average attendance in England and Wales up to 1914.



Source: Committee of Council on Education Annual Reports 1879-99 and Board of Education Annual Reports 1900-14

The national data show a steady climb in average attendance from 70% to a peak of 90% in 1909. The period 1879-85 was marked by an incremental improvement year on year. The trend line shows two plateaus, between 1885 and 1891 and between 1894 and 1900 linked by a steep improvement from 1892-4. The improvement from 77.3% to 81.3% over these two years followed the ending of school fees, implemented from September 1891. Attendance by 1900 had reached an annual average of 82.3%, but it continued to improve in the first decade of the twentieth century. At the same time, as shown in Chart 2 overleaf, the number of children on the registers of elementary schools grew from 3.7 million in 1879 to 5.7 million in 1900. The expansion of school rolls to include almost all working-class children of school age and to a level of attendance approaching modern equivalents signified a major change in patterns of behaviour. It meant regular schooling for at least 6 years (from age 5 to 11) had become the norm, whereas prior to 1870 most working-class children had experienced a truncated and intermittent school career.<sup>133</sup>

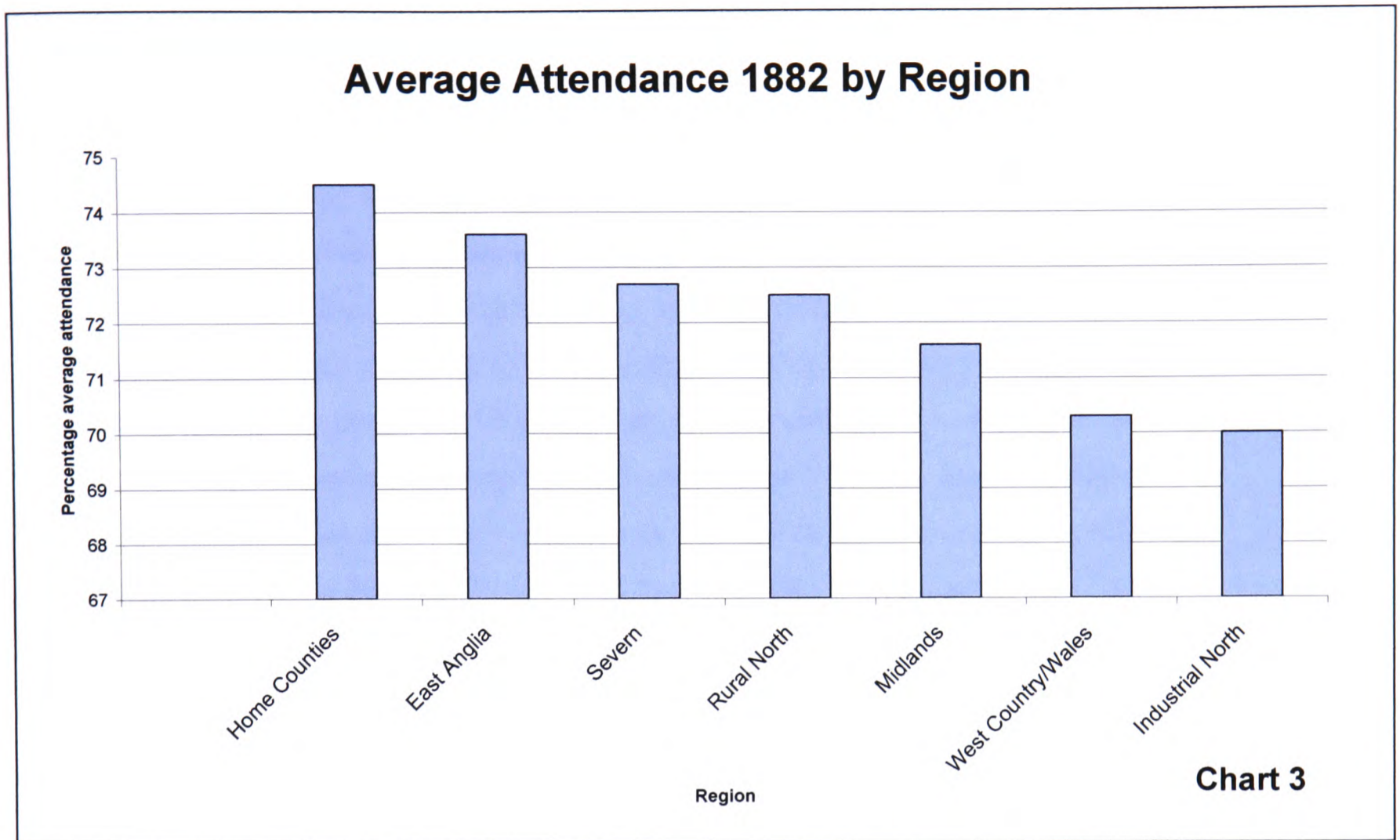
<sup>133</sup> Humphries, *Through the Mill*; Mitch, *Rise of Popular Literacy*, p.151.



Source: Committee of Council on Education Annual Reports 1879-99 and Board of Education Annual Reports 1900-14

Partly the rising school rolls reflected an increase in the proportion of children aged 5-13 in the general population, helped by falling child mortality rates in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. However, the majority of the increase was due to maximising school registration of the relevant age group. This was aided by the use of annual house to house censuses carried out by school attendance officers, which ensured that children coming up to school age were noted and chased up if later they did not appear on any school roll.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>134</sup> Mitch, *Rise of Popular Literacy*, pp.182-3.



Source: Committee of Council on Education Annual Report *Parliamentary Papers 1882*, xxiii (3312-1) pp.46-7 consolidated figs.

What lay beneath the national figures? Chart 3 shows the differences in average attendance between regions in 1882, after a decade of building to provide schools and when all parts of the country had bye-laws.<sup>135</sup> The figures combine urban and rural areas within the county averages. Unfortunately the Department collated their statistics at county level so it is not possible to differentiate between the large urban centres and their surrounding countryside. London and the Home Counties were performing well at this stage as compulsion had been enforced in the capital since 1873 with some vigour. One conclusion is that the further away from the centre of Government one was the weaker the school attendance – Wales and Cornwall had attendance rates under 70%, which may partly be explained by the sparsity of population and the difficulties caused by children having to walk long distances from home to school. This difference indicates the distinction which needs to be made between the ‘periphery’ and other rural areas.

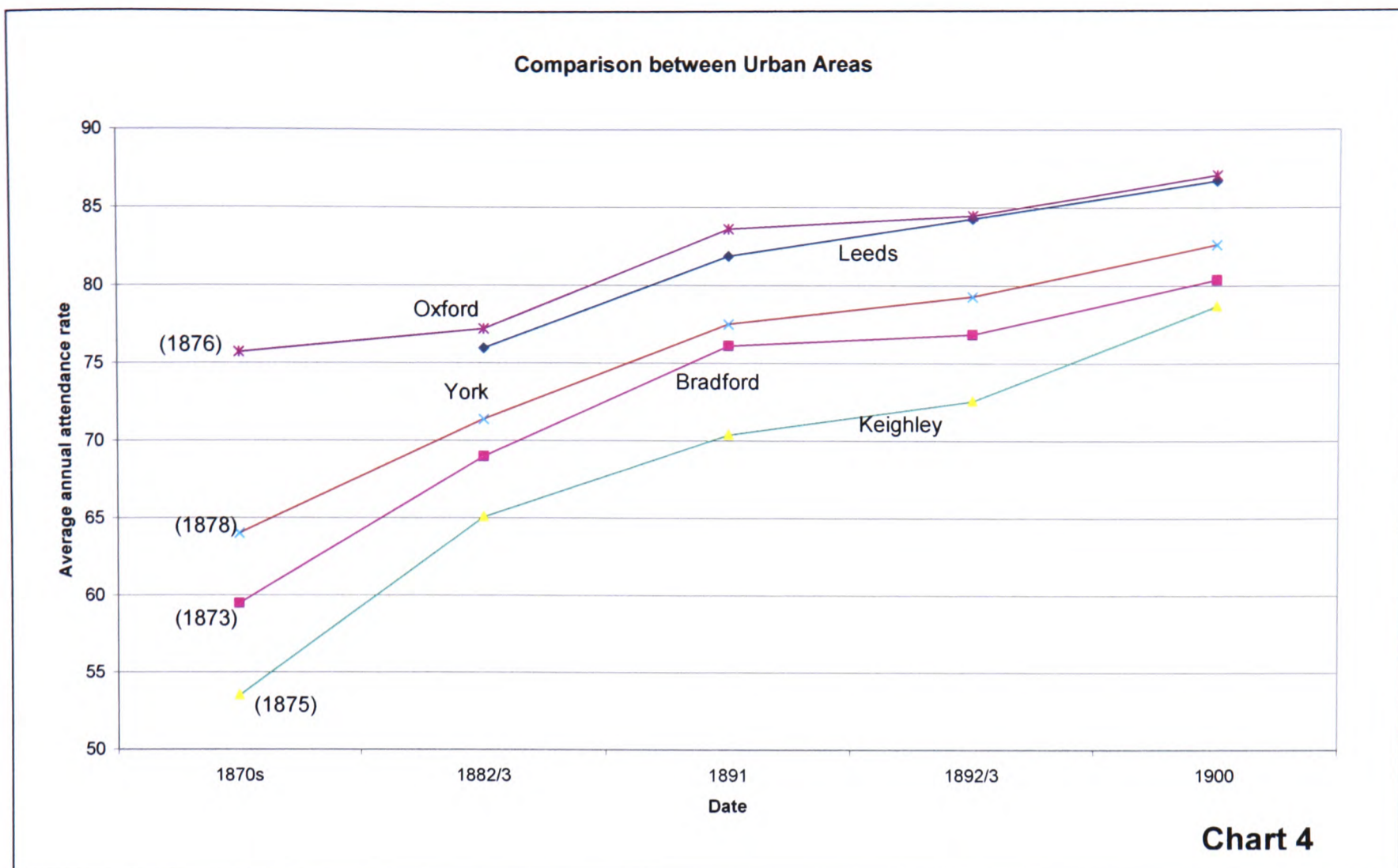
<sup>135</sup> For detailed figures by county, see Appendix C, p.283.

Distance to school especially affected infants and given the common practice of sending children to school from the age of 3, the impact of bad weather on attendance rates was bound to be greater than if only those over 5 were included in the statistics. However, the poorest performance occurred in those Northern counties where child labour was most common and formalised within the existing Factory and Workshop Acts, via half-time attendance in the final two years of schooling. This raises the issue of whether the half-time system, which originally had been a means of *extending* schooling to more children via a sort of indirect compulsion, was actually becoming by the 1880s an obstacle to efforts to raise the attendance levels of working-class children at school.<sup>136</sup> These regional differences indicate some of the local influences on attendance, yet the national trend was consistent across the country, with the weakest counties eventually making up some of the ground between them and the best performers by the late 1890s.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> James Pressley, "Childhood, Education and Labour: Moral Pressure and the End of the Half-Time System" (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Lancaster, 2000), pp.1-26.

<sup>137</sup> See Appendix C, p.283.



Sources: Leeds School Board Year Books 1883-1903; Keighley School Board Triennial Reports 1875-1902; Bradford School Board Attendance Committee Minutes 1874-85; Bradford School Board Triennial Reports 1885-1902; Oxford School Board Annual Reports 1871-1902; York School Attendance Committee Minutes 1877-93; York School Board minutes 1889-93 and Board papers to 1903.

Surviving evidence of the attendance rates of particular localities is patchy. Where data is available, it is clear that conditions differed at the outset, even between localities that were in fairly close proximity to each other. For instance, Chart 4 shows that average annual attendance in Leeds was nearly 76% in 1882, whereas it was only 69% in Bradford and 65% in Keighley. Child employment opportunities were abundant in both Bradford and Keighley, but much less so in Leeds, where the incidence of half-time working was also much lower. Keighley was a more scattered community, semi-rural and difficult to police – the School Board had fewer resources for new school places and for enforcement than Bradford’s. Yet if one compares towns that were similar in character, such as Oxford and York – old county towns little affected by industrial development and with longstanding school provision – there were still differences. In 1878, the average annual attendance of York’s elementary school children was 64%, whereas two years earlier, Oxford’s had already reached nearly 76%. The gap narrowed over time, though it

was still nearly 5% by 1900, by which time York's attendance rate was 82.67% and Oxford's 87.1%. The upwards trend was the same everywhere, but the initial conditions in relation to school places and local authority organisation made a crucial difference to progress. In the case of York, for instance, the lengthy ratepayer resistance to setting up a school board hindered the provision of new school places, which had a long-term effect on attendance.<sup>138</sup>

The improvement in attendance following the ending of school fees in 1891 is observable in Leeds, York and Keighley, but not in Oxford or Bradford. Although figures for the first three towns reflect the 'jump' seen in the national figures, it was clearly not the case everywhere that free schooling equalled better attendance. The battle for school attendance had to be won at local level and in the local circumstances. Their Annual Report for 1880 shows that the Education Department believed some would not be able to win it.

These figures ... show how much remains to be done, in many districts, in the way of enforcing the bye-laws, which now extend over the whole country. The number of empty seats in schools ... will ... be a guide to us in estimating the extent to which local authorities fail in carrying out their primary duty of securing the early and regular attendance of the children in their respective districts.<sup>139</sup>

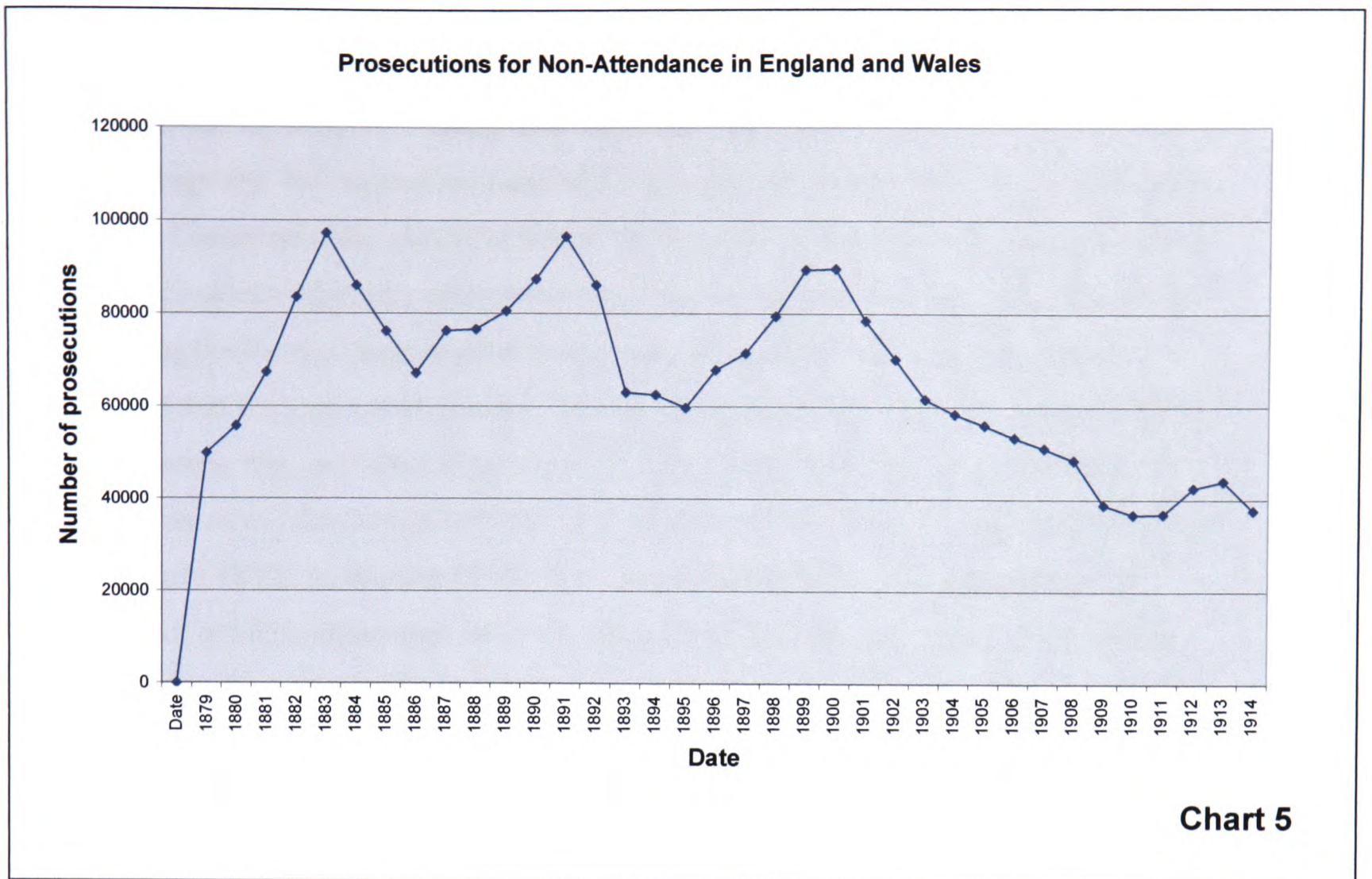
Passing a bill into law did not automatically lead to compliance and for the whole of this period, in the words of Gillian Sutherland, 'the brunt of the work inevitably fell on the local authorities, since policy now meant a continuing struggle in each community to accept and adjust to the attendance at school of every child for a minimum of five years.'<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Sutherland, *Policy-Making*, p.98.

<sup>139</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1881*, xxxii (2948-1) p.15.

<sup>140</sup> Sutherland, *Policy-Making*, p.161.



Source: Courts of Summary Jurisdiction Annual Figures for Number of Prosecutions under the Education Acts 1879-1914.- P.P. 1895 cviii (7725) p.132, P.P. 1900 ciii (123) p.55, P.P. 1920 l (684) pp.456-7

Chart 5 gives a graphical interpretation of the ‘struggle’ via a summary of local prosecution figures for England and Wales. Prosecutions are a help in understanding rates of truancy or wilful non-attendance, since overall absence figures include those children off school sick or for other ‘legitimate’ reasons. Local authorities were unlikely to embark on the expense of a court summons where non-attendance was either explicable or acceptable, such as in the case of epidemic or chronic disease. The variations in the level of prosecutions present some interesting features – after an initial rise when local authorities were presumably setting up their enforcement procedures, the level fell back in the mid-1880s and mid-1890s with two peaks in the early 1890s and around 1900. There are ways of explaining these – initial enthusiasm for prosecution may have faded as it proved less effectual than hoped for. Sensitivity to economic circumstances may have influenced the pattern too – the drops in prosecutions in the mid-1880s and mid-1890s coincide with periods of economic depression.<sup>141</sup> Decisions by local authorities to

<sup>141</sup> B.R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.124.

hold off prosecuting parents of persistent absentees may have been due to sympathy for family needs for children's labour and income during a time of hardship; or alternatively to the pragmatic feeling that the costs of a court case were not worth it if fines could not be paid. Conversely, the ending of fees in 1891 could be seen as an economic 'incentive' to parents since elementary education was now free, though of course, parents were still foregoing the income their children might earn. Many local authorities, however, believed that the removal of fees had lifted a barrier for the poorest families and expected attendance to rise, as did the Department.<sup>142</sup> They were therefore less sympathetic to poverty as an excuse for non-attendance after 1891 and the number of prosecutions rose in the early 1890s. In the late 1890s, there seem to have been more prosecutions of parents of older children aged 12 or 13, just prior to and after the raising of the school leaving age. Local authorities may therefore have been making a point of prosecuting those who refused to adapt to new restrictions on the age at which children could start work. When the figures for prosecution are compared with the increase in attendance over the period up to 1900, one could tentatively conclude that over a twenty year period, local authorities were 'winning the struggle'.

However, prosecution figures represented the 'tip of the iceberg' where enforcement of attendance was concerned and policy on prosecution differed depending on local circumstances and relationships between local authorities and local magistrates, so the figures themselves do not reveal the nature and pattern of the struggle for school attendance in each locality. It is probable that the national trend in attendance was in some ways the result of different local influences on parental behaviour and household calculations as well as the existence of legal sanctions. Some of these influences were determined by local economic circumstances – others by the availability and quality of educational provision in each area. However, the policies of the state and their local application do have a bearing on the changes observed. A clearly-observed national trend, in spite of the many different local influences on behaviour, suggests that there was some consistency of approach to enforcement across the country.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> E.g. Keighley School Board *KSB Triennial Reports 1890-3*; BradSB *Triennial Reports 1889-91*.

<sup>143</sup> See page 66 below for details on the prosecution process.

Sutherland concludes ‘Gradually, the habit was being acquired’.<sup>144</sup> The evident reduction in absenteeism however begs many questions about just how the ‘habit’ of school attendance was acquired. The Education Department provided weak leadership in this area, so was it due to vigorous promotion and enforcement by local authorities or schools themselves? Or was it due to a separate and autonomous change in parental attitudes? The answers to these questions have to be sought at the local level, within particular socio-economic circumstances and relationships between those in authority and working-class communities.

### **Urban enforcement – policing and pragmatism**

The balance of the relationship between the enforcing authority and the local working-class community was the result of a combination of elements. Firstly, the starting point for administering the law was not the same everywhere – the availability of school places and the local ‘traditions’ of schooling could limit action on attendance; the powers of the local authority over schools differed depending on whether it was an elected school board or an appointed school attendance committee, as did the resources available. In addition external circumstances, especially the tradition of child labour in the local economy, had a major effect on local authorities’ capacity to enforce attendance bye-laws and on their scope for influencing the behaviour of parents and of employers over school attendance.

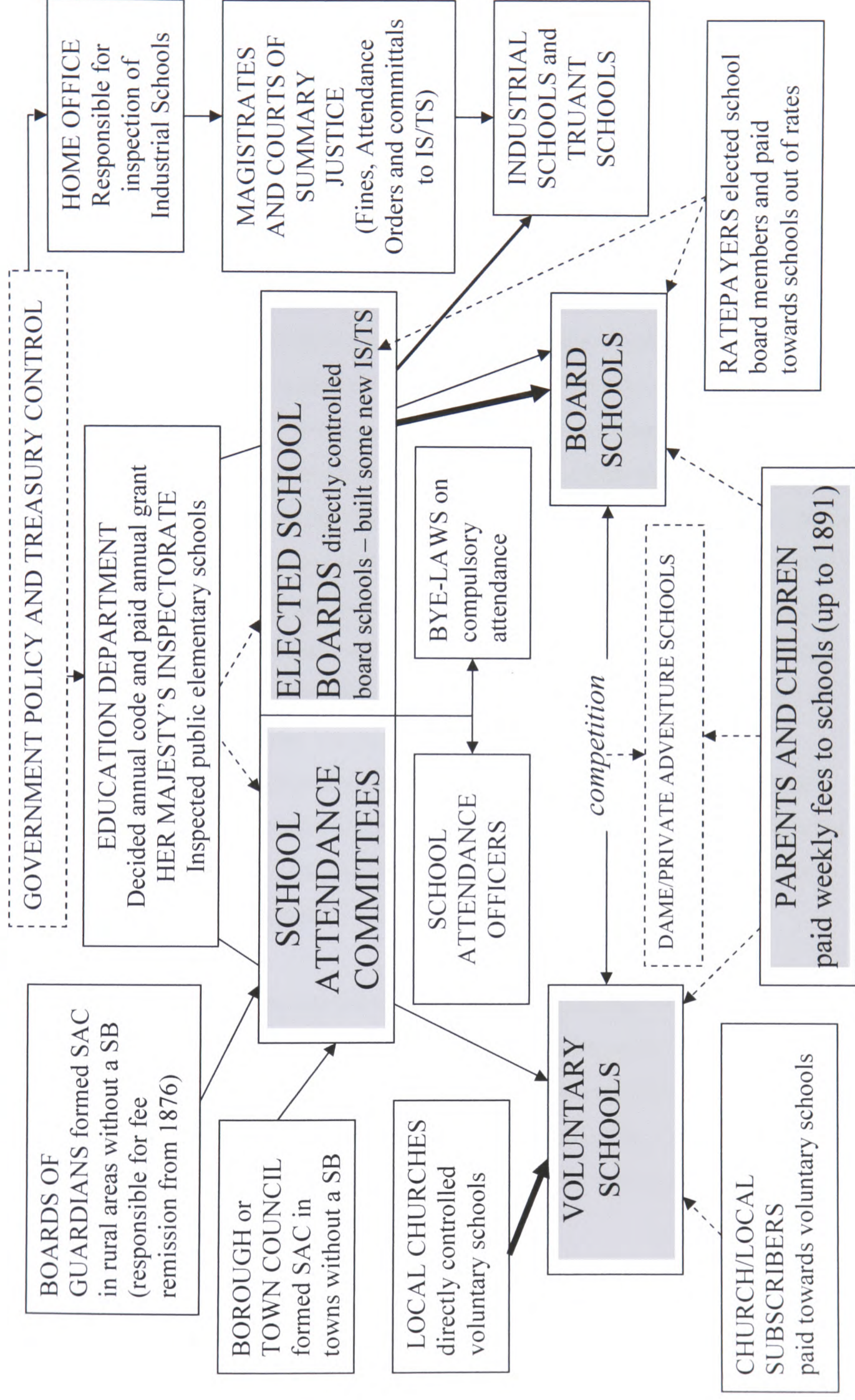
From an administrative point of view, it would be hard to exaggerate the complexity of the practical task facing local authorities, in terms both of the number of different bodies with which they had to communicate and the lack of control they had over the key instruments for reinforcing attendance - the schools and the courts. Diagram A overleaf shows the variants of local authority and school type in the ‘system’ and the many ‘stakeholders’. A directly-elected school board had considerably more leverage over its own schools, funded from the rates, than over any voluntary schools in its area. The appointed school attendance committee had no practical control over the schools in its

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<sup>144</sup> Sutherland, *Policy-Making*, p.162.

DIAGRAM A

The 'System' for Administering Public Elementary Schools in the Nineteenth Century



area at all. Indeed, Sutherland comments, ‘It is hardly worth discussing the possibility of their [appointed school attendance committees] taking initiatives.’<sup>145</sup> The communications required between different groups of people in the ‘system’ for monitoring and improving school attendance must have militated against effective enforcement even in the best-organised places. For instance, after 1876, all responsibility for remitting school fees to parents too poor to pay them was vested in poor law guardians. This cut across the established practices of many school boards, removed from their discretion a potential inducement to attendance and deterred some parents from applying for help due to the association with pauperisation, though in fact such remission did not result in pauper status.<sup>146</sup> Some guardians were more reluctant to spend money on school fees than the school board or attendance committee, if they had no responsibility for attendance.<sup>147</sup> Thus the system became more complicated and less effective over time as new roles were introduced by successive legislation. At the local level, this resulted in a patchwork of different administrative arrangements in adjoining areas, which local authorities had to negotiate in order to enforce their bye-laws.<sup>148</sup> In relation to schools, local authorities had no control over when schools had holidays, nor could they force schools to report persistent truants. For instance, the Oxford School Board tried to persuade the city’s schools to adopt common holiday dates to tackle irregularity and complained in 1888 of ‘unreasonable dismissals, refusals to admit and [their] neglect to report absence from school’.<sup>149</sup> Yet relations between the School Board and schools in Oxford were considered to be good.<sup>150</sup>

Parents similarly could avoid the attentions of the authorities by their choice of school or by exploiting the gaps of knowledge between the different parts of the system of enforcement. There were frequent complaints about ‘capricious removals’ of children from one school to another for the purpose of avoiding arrears of fees or pursuit by the attendance officer. In York, the attendance committee tried to introduce a transfer form

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p.98.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p.170.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p.172.

<sup>148</sup> In York for instance, an estimated 2000 children attended city schools but lived outside its boundaries, where there was no follow-up of absentees - *YSAC Mins.* 29.11.1879.

<sup>149</sup> *OSB Report 1874 and 1888.*

<sup>150</sup> Ibid. 1872.

which was supposed to record any fees owing to the new school and an extra fee in the first week if the child had not moved house, but the schools did not organise themselves to implement it.<sup>151</sup>

School boards were in the better position to enforce attendance, but there was strong resistance to their introduction in many places for both financial and denominational reasons. In York, for instance, a sustained resistance by ratepayers held off the establishment of a school board until 1889.<sup>152</sup> However, where population had expanded rapidly and new schools were required, school boards were unavoidable, many being set up in the early 1870s.<sup>153</sup> This should have enabled the new school boards to tackle attendance issues quickly in the big cities and major industrial centres. But many were unable to insist on school attendance effectively for several years, as there was a severe shortage of school places. The Huddersfield School Board first met in February 1871 and within a year had agreed it needed to build 13 new schools for nearly 5,000 children who were not in school – there were virtually no schools for infants. This absorbed most of the Board's time over the next three years and only then did it set up a committee to monitor attendance.<sup>154</sup> The limits on action were reflected in a poster issued in September 1872 (see overleaf), which adopted a tentative approach to school attendance. The new authorities had to make parents aware of the new rules, but they also had to 'negotiate' with their local community to accept them, otherwise, enforcement would be overwhelmingly expensive and ultimately unsuccessful. Local authorities had to find ways to persuade parents to co-operate – even if that meant pleading with them.

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<sup>151</sup> YSAC *Mins.* 22.5.1880.

<sup>152</sup> Sutherland, *Policy-Making*, p.98.

<sup>153</sup> London, Birmingham, Leeds, Sheffield, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle and Bradford all had school boards by 1872.

<sup>154</sup> HuSB *Minutes* first met 5.3.1874.

HUDDERSFIELD



SCHOOL BOARD.

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TO PARENTS WHO DO NOT SEND THEIR  
CHILDREN TO SCHOOL.

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The Education Act has made the benevolent provision that every child in the kingdom shall be educated. For this purpose it empowers the Huddersfield School Board to compel the regular attendance at school of children between 5 and 13 years of age, unless sufficient cause can be shown for their absence, and **IT IS THE DUTY OF THE BOARD TO SEE THAT SUCH ATTENDANCE IS REGULARLY MAINTAINED.**

The Board take this opportunity of calling your attention to the existence of public elementary schools in your neighbourhood, where efficient education is provided, and do earnestly hope that you will consult your own interests and the educational welfare of your children by availing yourselves at once of those opportunities which are provided for you in existing schools.

The Board beg to remind you that it is your duty to send your children to school, and that although you may suffer some temporary inconvenience by doing so, you will be more than compensated by your children being carefully trained, and fitted for useful and responsible positions in society.

— GTHO GILES ABBOTT,

Clerk of the Board.

Office of the Board,  
27, Estate Buildings,  
Huddersfield.

Of course, the pleading could come in both directions, as a letter from George Booth of Huddersfield illustrates, ‘I wrote before to inform you that i was out of employment and unable to pay the children’s school money, and I am still in the same position, but if your school is under the regulation of the School Board of Huddersfield, now in operation under the Education Act, then our children is intitled to instruction free of charge until i am able to pay.’<sup>155</sup> Clearly there were expectations on both sides.

Despite the fact that legal compulsion was in place, if too many of the community refused to co-operate then it was extremely difficult for the new local authorities to increase attendance significantly. Two key factors in terms of ensuring parents sent their children to school were the level of commitment which already existed within each local community before 1880, and the supply of school places to fulfil any increased demand. But complicating this in urban areas was the *type* of schooling preferred by the community – for instance, where there was a vigorous child labour market, then Sunday Schools flourished, for the obvious reason that the school did not get in the way of the child’s work.<sup>156</sup> Similarly, dame schools, plait schools and other what one might call ‘flexible institutions’ were popular with working-class parents, for logical reasons.<sup>157</sup> Such schools were criticised by middle-class commentators. ‘No registers are kept and ... the children come and go as they like and when they like,’ was the comment by the York School Attendance Committee on one private adventure school in York in 1887, but seen from the parental perspective, the flexibility provided by such schools was a welcome boon when family crises or economic need took priority for the child’s time.<sup>158</sup> Such schools were never likely to come within the remit of government funding, so were often in inadequate premises, without resources and with unqualified teachers. On the other hand there was no incentive for the better-off church schools to expand their clientele and indeed it could be damaging to their own interests to do so. In 1890, the managers of the Priory St Wesleyan Schools of York reconfirmed a resolution they had passed in 1877, that ‘to accept promiscuously the children of the poorest and wastrel classes ... would be

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid. 23.9.1872.

<sup>156</sup> Thomas W. Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working-Class Culture, 1780-1850* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), pp.151-2.

<sup>157</sup> Gardner, *Lost Elementary Schools*, pp.92-7; Finlayson, *Citizen*, p.95.

<sup>158</sup> YSAC Mins. 26.4.1887.

fatal to the well-being of the school, as it would most assuredly have the effect of driving away the children of the better-to-do working class, such as are now in attendance.’<sup>159</sup>

Neither was the answer easily found to this problem in the building of new elementary schools. The early 1870s saw a rush to build, to improve and to extend church schools as the voluntary societies fought to ‘fill the gap’ and thus prevent the formation of school boards in their areas. Central government sought via its grants to raise the standards of building for new schools and ensure only qualified teachers were employed, but ratepayers’ preferences often pushed in the opposite direction. Victorian social policy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century could be characterised as a struggle between ratepayer parsimony and city council improvers in areas such as public health, sanitation and town planning.<sup>160</sup> In the field of education, the battles were no less fierce, more so perhaps because the actual benefits were to be felt by those families least likely to be paying any rates. The buildings of All Saints School in York had been condemned by Her Majesty’s Inspectors in 1871 even though it was deemed worthy of government funds. It was finally shut down in 1887 – ‘It is utterly unsuitable, and can never be made suitable. It is held in an upper room of an old dilapidated house in a small court; it has no offices (ie toilets), no playground,’ concluded the HMI.<sup>161</sup> York had particular difficulties in meeting the needs of the ‘waifs and wastrels’ which other schools would not accept – and in particular, many of the church schools resisted receiving truanting children assigned to them by magistrates’ courts.<sup>162</sup> Truants were instead referred to a ‘wastrel school’ set up in the Merchant Tailors’ Hall. Within little more than a year, it had failed due to lack of funds and poor attendance. The Committee also found that children slipped out of sight when schools in the poorest districts closed and there was no obvious alternative in those parts of the City.<sup>163</sup>

Beyond the problems associated with providing sufficient school places, the resources available for enforcement were also very limited and this applied whether the local

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid. 23.10.1890.

<sup>160</sup> Harling, *Modern British State*, pp.106-10.

<sup>161</sup> YSAC *Mins.* 26.4.1887.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. 23.4.1877.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid. 30.1.1879.

authority was a school board or an attendance committee. School boards may have had more rate income, but they also had to sustain more borrowing for new school buildings. Attendance committees could access rate income but on a very small scale. Both types of local authority came under pressure from ratepayers to contain spending. On the one hand, the pressure for 'value for money' from the investment in working-class education exerted a strong influence in favour of enforcement of school attendance, but on the other, proving that the enforcement system was having results was more of a challenge, especially if local schools were unco-operative, or at the other extreme, expected more effective follow-up of absentees than the local authority could deliver. However, for many of them, though not all, the most vexing problem was the lack of support in the courts.

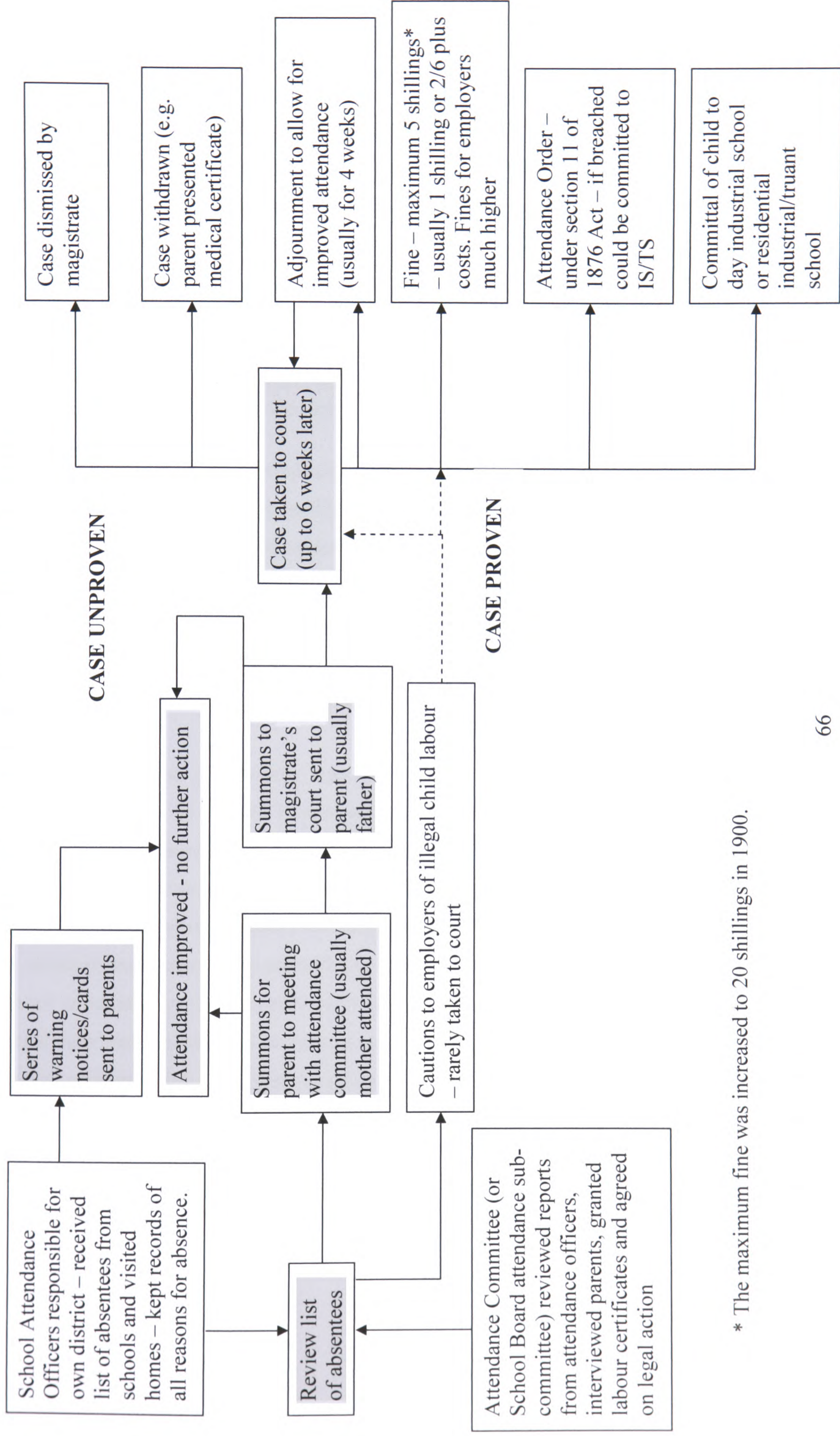
Diagram B overleaf shows the process of enforcement which was followed by most local authorities, though the proportion of parents taken forward to each stage could vary greatly. The process of 'converting' parents to sending their children more regularly to school ultimately depended on visits by attendance officers, summonses to meetings with the attendance committee and court action. The bulk of parents got no further than the warning notices, and most of the rest were dealt with at meetings of the attendance committee. The proportion going through the court was small. In Oxford, a lack of confidence that the magistrates would support them made the School Board reluctant to prosecute for non-attendance but other punitive actions such as summoning parents to warning meetings with board members were numerous. In 1887, the Oxford Attendance Officer made more than 6,000 visits to children's homes and schools, from which more than a thousand warning notices were issued, but only 128 parents were actually taken to court.<sup>164</sup> On conviction, most parents could expect a fine plus costs, or an adjournment or attendance order, which would be reviewed a month or six weeks later. Potentially, the persistently truanting child could be removed from home to a residential truant school or industrial school. Truant schools offered a short-term 'shock' approach of intensive discipline for a wayward child, usually lasting a few months, before he (there were very few truant schools for girls) was returned to his home and elementary school.

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<sup>164</sup> OSB Report 1887.

DIAGRAM B

The Enforcement of Compulsory School Attendance from 1880



\* The maximum fine was increased to 20 shillings in 1900.

Industrial schools were designed for long-term corrective care where the child was thought to be at risk of neglect or involvement in crime – children were usually committed to them for several years although they could be released on licence. The York School Attendance Committee summed up its understanding of the distinction thus,

The difference between an Industrial School and Truant School is that the former is intended for children whose home surroundings are bad and who are neglected, that if not at once looked after and cared for, are in danger of becoming criminals, the latter is intended for children who stay away from school unknown to and against the will of their parents (who as a rule are at work all day and cannot therefore keep a constant supervision over their children).<sup>165</sup>

The York councillors preferred the industrial school as a means of long-term reformation out of the ‘evil surroundings’ of the family and previous home – a policy they summarised in their own words, ‘education is cheaper than conviction’.<sup>166</sup> Committal to a truant or industrial school was appropriate for only a tiny minority of truants and usually occurred where the child was beyond the control of parents, or where neglect or moral danger were suspected. It represented an expensive solution of extreme measures for a tiny minority of truants since most of the maintenance costs fell on the authority.

The pursuit of court cases was lengthy, costly and dependent on the individual attitudes of the local magistrates. In its 1882 Report, the Oxford Board defended its record, ‘The Board has not been deficient in energy in looking after irregular children, but they find an increasing difficulty in bringing home to parents in the City the consequences of their neglect, owing to the unwillingness of the Magistrates to do more than make attendance orders, which in many cases are systematically disregarded.’<sup>167</sup> This was a common, though not universal experience in the courts, because many magistrates held to the traditional view that the state had no business interfering in parental rights over which school their child attended, even if it was a private adventure or dame school. Often they took the view that the parent’s poverty and need for their child’s earnings had priority over the state’s requirement for regular schooling.<sup>168</sup> However, not all magistrates were

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<sup>165</sup> YSAC *Mins.* 21.11.1883.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.* 27.7.1881.

<sup>167</sup> OSB *Report* 1882.

<sup>168</sup> Rubinstein, "London School Board", p.248.

unsympathetic to local authorities – conviction rates in some places were high, although this may have been due to a judicious sifting of cases by the authority, with only those most flagrantly in defiance of the law ending up in court.<sup>169</sup>

On top of these administrative obstacles, local socio-economic conditions added to the challenge facing local authorities. In urban centres, regular trade depressions reduced families' commitment to schooling, as the York School Attendance Committee noted in November 1879, 'the great amount of poverty there has been during the last twelve months on which account many parents have been obliged to keep their children from school, not having the means to provide proper clothing and the necessary school books... nor to pay the school fees.'<sup>170</sup> There was an awareness of the deeper causes of non-attendance, such as poor-quality housing and lack of sanitation, which contributed to poor health, but the capacity of school boards or attendance committees to relieve child poverty or malnutrition was strictly limited by law before 1907.

Once children reached an age for earning, local job opportunities exerted a pull which the poorest could not resist, though some local authorities, like Oxford and York, required children to be older and to achieve higher standards than the minimum in the model bye-laws before they were given labour certificates. In February 1882, George Carter's mother applied to the York School Attendance Committee for him to be allowed to take up a job paying 4s 6d a week – she was a widow with 7 children and had been refused parish relief. George was already 11 but in York, the bye-laws did not allow him to work and the request was refused.<sup>171</sup> The attitudes of employers rarely appear in the record – Grace Belfiore, in a study of school attendance in 3 Essex towns, found some employers keen enough to support education that they built their own schools and even nurseries for female employees' children.<sup>172</sup> The early factory acts which had institutionalised half-time schooling for children working in mills did encourage some investment by employers in factory schools and even new ones especially for half-timers, such as the

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<sup>169</sup> Mitch, *Rise of Popular Literacy*, pp.183-5; Belfiore, "Family Strategies", p.358.

<sup>170</sup> YSAC *Mins.* 10.11.1879.

<sup>171</sup> YSAC *Mins.* 13.2.1882.

<sup>172</sup> Belfiore, "Family Strategies", p.117.

Cotton Factory School in Coventry.<sup>173</sup> But the imposition of compulsory attendance in 1880 also provoked hostility from employers who realised that children already working for them would have to return to school under the new bye-laws – in York, for instance, a deputation of local employers to the attendance committee asked for a reduction in the exemption standard required so that those who had already started work did not have to return to school. This was supported by the local Factory Inspector.<sup>174</sup> Employers could be prosecuted for employing under-age children, with quite swingeing fines, but this rarely happened – in Coventry there were only 7 prosecutions in the late 1870s and all of small businesses.<sup>175</sup> In Oxford, hundreds of cautions were sent to employers, but the number of actual summonses each year was usually in single figures.<sup>176</sup>

Thus in terms of both prevailing attitudes and the influences on family life, local authorities faced an uphill struggle to enforce regular attendance – it was not a case of a powerful state imposing its will, more like a minnow trying to nip a whale in a particular direction. However, the local evidence makes clear that it *was* possible for urban local authorities to make an impact on school attendance rates through their policies over enforcement. At the core of the role was the balance between the commitment to schooling a child against the parent's need for his or her time and labour. In practice it was not a simple judgement to make, nor straightforward to enforce. Thus attendance committees developed a range of roles, 'to relieve, to regulate, to punish and to educate – and to negotiate' – all of which combined policing, persuasion and if not the provision, then the signposting of sources of welfare support for families.<sup>177</sup>

As we have seen from Huddersfield, confronting the community with the requirements of the law could be a tentative business, but after 1880, it was more confidently and frequently done – with repeated issues of handbills to parents and posters. Bradford School Board, for instance, ordered 20,000 copies of its new bye-laws – then another

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<sup>173</sup> CoSB *Mins.* 6.1.1881.

<sup>174</sup> YSAC *Mins.* 12.4.1881.

<sup>175</sup> Coventry School Board CoSB, "Register of Summonses for Non-Attendance" (Coventry: 1874-99), 25.4.1878 – 5.4.1879.

<sup>176</sup> OSB *Report* 1887 notes 33 summonses, but this was exceptional and from 1892-6, there were 4-7 per year.

<sup>177</sup> Belfiore, "Family Strategies", p.332.

20,000 to go out via schools to parents. All urban local authorities employed full-time school attendance officers, who were the chief ‘communicators’ with both schools and local communities – though their abilities varied.<sup>178</sup> Fundamental to their effectiveness were the compiling of information about children and families, the collection of data from schools on children’s absences, and their visibility within the community. Their ability to ‘know the neighbourhood’ was recognised as one of the keys to improving attendance at school. That they did not always succeed left them open to criticism from school managers and teachers – some of this was the result of the sheer difficulty of tracking down children whose families shifted from place to place. The institution of an annual ‘census’ of children in each district was designed to address the problem of parents simply not registering their child when it reached the age of compulsory schooling.<sup>179</sup>

In Oxford, disillusionment with the magistrates led the School Board to rely more on warning letters and their own meetings with parents than on prosecution. A statistical comparison of the impact of court fines and summonses with meetings showed the latter *were* more effective in reducing absenteeism in Oxford’s elementary schools.<sup>180</sup> Naming and shaming in the local press of parents successfully prosecuted in the courts was also a common deterrent practice. Truancy sweeps of the streets were used and sometimes an attendance officer was appointed simply to monitor the streets, pick up truants during the day and return them to school.<sup>181</sup> The strict scrutiny of excuses, even to the point of paying for medical examinations of children suspected not to be genuinely unwell was another way of deterring spurious excuses for long-term absences from school.<sup>182</sup> All of this represented a creeping and in some cases persistent intervention in the lives of working-class families to persuade them to conform to the law.

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<sup>178</sup> YSAC *Mins.* 6.12.1887 & 1.5.1888 – complaints by clergy about attendance officers.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.* 16.6.1888 on lack of systematic recording of under-5s in York.

<sup>180</sup> Nicola Sheldon, "Policing Truancy 1870-1904: Local Variations in the Enforcement of Compulsory Education in England" (unpublished MSc thesis, University of Oxford, 2004), p.49.

<sup>181</sup> YSAC *Mins.* 9.11.1888; Leeds School Board Attendance Committee LSBAC *Minutes* 27.6.1879.

<sup>182</sup> OSB *Report* 1896.

At the same time, there were ‘softer’ paternalistic policies designed to respond to some of the causes of absence and positively encourage attendance, though they were of less significance than the punitive sanctions. What could be broadly termed paternalistic policies included a generous approach to fee remission, and even a lax attitude to non-attendance for what could be broadly called ‘family needs’. In York, the school attendance committee exercised some sensitivity when it came to an agreement with the local guardians that it would scrutinise applications and then pass them to the guardians for approval. Parents did not have to contact the guardians or attend poor law premises and were therefore spared any association with an application for poor law relief. The rate of support was about 5% of children, who were given free education for up to 6 months at a time. In Leeds, and other big cities, fee remission was granted ‘automatically’ via a written application to the school board once a means-test had been applied and this resulted in a much higher proportion of families receiving support.<sup>183</sup> Local authorities, like many schools, were more ready to condone the absence of girls needed at home than boys. In West Yorkshire, the Leeds and Keighley school boards frequently granted temporary leave of absence to both girls and boys for the care of sick parents or to support a widowed mother. The length of absence was negotiated and fixed by the board or committee.<sup>184</sup> They were less likely to agree to an absence to go to work where there were no extenuating or unusual circumstances. Instead, they referred parents to charitable institutions or the local Charity Organisation Society.<sup>185</sup>

In time, local authorities introduced incentives in schools to improve attendance, for both teachers and children – in Leeds, a portion of the school grant was held back against attendance targets and thus affected teachers’ salaries. By the 1890s, medals and certificate schemes to reward high levels of attendance were becoming popular.<sup>186</sup> School board and attendance committee members visited schools regularly.<sup>187</sup> At the same time, they gave hearing to parental complaints about schools – both over discipline and what

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<sup>183</sup> Belfiore, "Family Strategies", pp.342-3; LSBAC *Leeds Attendance Committee* 29.8.1877.

<sup>184</sup> LSBAC *Leeds Attendance Committee* 30.4.1875; Leeds School Board *LSB Year Books* 1901 ‘Appeals for Total or Partial Exemption’ adopted 11.6.1895; *KSB Attendance Cttee* 4.6.1878, 11.3.1885, 9.9.1885, 23.1.1890.

<sup>185</sup> YSAC *Mins.* 12.11.1883.

<sup>186</sup> *LSB Year Books* 1888; LSBAC *Leeds Attendance Committee* 10.2.1897.

<sup>187</sup> YSAC *Mins.* 13.3.1882, 22.5.1882.

could be called ‘fair treatment’, acting as an intermediary.<sup>188</sup> In this way, local authorities helped to build up more positive relationships with parents and schools to support the habit of attendance.

However, there were relatively fewer ‘carrots’ to encourage better attendance than ‘sticks’ to deter absenteeism. Perhaps the major positive change for families was the ending of school fees from 1891 which lessened the economic burden of schooling on poor families. However, not all places saw an improvement in attendance. Bradford School Board concluded, ‘the abolition of school fees has exercised no influence upon the attendance of the children, ... for ...securing... reasonable regularity of attendance it is necessary that the magistrates ... exercise greater vigour in dealing with the cases that are brought before them.’<sup>189</sup> Nevertheless, there was a shift in perceptions about the type of parents and children coming under the scrutiny of the authorities and the social problems with which they were dealing by the end of the 1890s. As the Bradford School Board noted, ‘The class of parent now to be dealt with for neglect are mostly those who not only wilfully and persistently fail to send their children to school, but who evince neither care for nor interest in their children’s present or future physical and moral well-being.’<sup>190</sup> To some extent, this judgement was the result of changes in perceptions of truancy by the middle classes. The improvements in regular attendance by the majority drew attention to those who were still not conforming to expectations.<sup>191</sup> The outcomes in each town were also dependent on the zeal of the school board or attendance committee, the efficiency of the enforcement machinery and the resources at their disposal. Yet they were determined even more by local circumstances, to which local authorities were forced to react pragmatically and it was only by understanding the terms on which regular schooling could be enforced in their particular area that they were able to improve attendance. This process is explored in detail in the two case studies which follow.

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid. 19.10.1886 parental complaint about school discipline, 30.11.1891 parental complaint against sons’ exclusion by a school; LSBAC *Leeds Attendance Committee* 9.4.1880 - the Board reversed a head teacher’s decision to expel a girl; 18.10.1893 – the Board acted against a headteacher who had sent pupils home due to poor clothing,

<sup>189</sup> BradSB *Triennial Reports* 1891-4.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid. 1898-1900.

<sup>191</sup> Mitch, *Rise of Popular Literacy*, p.182.

## **Oxford case study – policing and civilising**

In Oxford, an enthusiastic local authority was able to improve school attendance rapidly and keep it higher than the national average for the whole of its period of office.

However, it also had obstacles to overcome, both in the attitudes of the voluntary schools and those of poor parents whose livelihoods were mainly dependent on low-paid service work.

From 1871 to 1902 the Oxford School Board's 9 members oversaw the enforcement of school attendance in the city. They were in one respect a unique school board, having 3 members directly nominated by the university, and several of the elected places were regularly occupied by members of or those associated with the university, such as Eleanor Smith, sister of the mathematician Henry Smith, and active in the setting up of Somerville College.<sup>192</sup> Other members over the years included T.H. Green (1880-82), Montagu Burrows (1873-77), Lancelot Ridley Phelps (1886-9) and Dr John Percival (1880-86), President of Trinity College and a notable educationist who had promoted ragged schools in Bristol.<sup>193</sup> This is not to minimise the influence of the city representatives – there was a strong Liberal influence on the city council but the Board as a whole was dominated by clergymen. This was fortuitous in terms of maintaining good relations with the elementary schools in the city, all of which were provided by the church societies. Although this meant the Board had less control over the schools than if it had built its own, the positive result was that it could, from the start, devote its whole attention to improving school attendance.

The members exhibited a strong commitment to the value of elementary education which was evidenced by relentless activity to enforce attendance. Within months of their election, the first Board had passed bye-laws on attendance and by the end of 1871, they had completed their census of the city's children, finding that out of an estimated five and

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<sup>192</sup> Keith Hannabuss, "Smith, Henry John Stephen (1826-83)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online version cited 5.10.2006.

<sup>193</sup> John Sadler, "Percival, John (1834-1918)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online version cited 5.10.2006.

half thousand children above the age of 5, over a thousand were not attending any school. Average attendance by those who were on the registers was only 65.82%.<sup>194</sup> The Oxford School Board faced some practical obstacles, in terms of enforcing school attendance, which were common in urban areas. On the one hand, they had to negotiate the fine politics of taking up responsibility for enforcing attendance in well-established (and sometimes socially well-connected) voluntary schools, and at the same time, they felt their lack of influence over attendance in the numerous small private adventure and dame schools, which flourished in Oxford.<sup>195</sup> In the short-term, attendance at these schools actually increased as parents seemingly got the message that children needed to attend school, but chose schools which allowed them to retain flexibility to meet family needs when they arose – rather than public elementary schools controlled by the middle classes, which enforced punctuality and regular attendance.

In Oxford, voluntary schools were well-established and the ‘class’ issue was a significant variable in the attendance equation. The Board were clear that their task was to bring the poorest into school, especially those who had never attended in the past, but they often found the schools, sensitive to their existing clientele, reluctant to accept dirty, verminous or ill-clad children from the slums.<sup>196</sup> This was even more the case if the child had been truanting and the court wanted to make an attendance order to a specific school. The setting-up of a day industrial school in 1879 was seen to answer a number of problems – where to place the children other schools did not want, and where best to reform their behaviour and do it in the most efficient fashion, with the least impact on the rates. For a small city like Oxford (its population in 1881 was 35,000), this was an ambitious project reflecting a long-term commitment of funds. They justified the initial layout of £2865 2s 3d with the rather far-sighted claim that, ‘The children who are sent to it are mostly of a class which would have been likely to prove expensive to society, if nothing had been done to reclaim them.’<sup>197</sup> Whether the Board had the future cost of pauperism or crime in mind when making this statement is not clear. The school was maintained within a net

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<sup>194</sup> OSB *Report* 1871.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.* 1873, 1874.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.* 1888.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.* 1879.

cost to the budget of £650 p.a. until 1896, whilst rates remained close to or below 1d in the £.<sup>198</sup>

It is possible to discern a set of core beliefs held by members of the Oxford School Board, affecting their policies and actions, since there was great continuity of membership over a period of 30 years. The members were concerned to reform behaviour of both parents and their absentee children, though the Board was less inclined to remove children from what they considered to be a neglectful home environment than some other authorities. Concerns about juvenile delinquency were also influential on the Board's policies – as has been noted by John Gillis in his article on Oxford's hooligan problems of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>199</sup> The motivation for intervention ranged from the positive desire to rescue destitute children to the belief that such children needed to be disciplined and contained to protect society from them. Possibly fears were exacerbated in Oxford due to 'town and gown' conflicts which had erupted violently in the 1860s.<sup>200</sup> The Board's major investment in a day industrial school was designed to be a visible deterrent in the local community to potential truants as well as a means of reforming those who had truanted. Children were committed to the school usually for a few months and then returned to their usual elementary school, the aim being that their reformed behaviour would be a recommendation (or a threat) to other children tempted to go astray. Similarly, costs at the day industrial school were higher than at the elementary schools, and parents were pursued persistently for their contributions – in 1883, a good year for the recovery of fees, thirty-eight parents were summoned to court for arrears, the action yielding £22 19s with £5 10s 6d still unpaid by the end of the year.<sup>201</sup> This reinforced to parents the extra cost of truancy over regular attendance. By 1884, the average attendance rate for children who had returned to school on licence from the day industrial school was an impressive 96%, not allowing for illness.<sup>202</sup> It was so effective that only 36

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid. 1879, 1881, 1896.

<sup>199</sup> John R. Gillis, "The Evolution of Juvenile Delinquency in England, 1890-1914", *Past & Present* 67 (1975), p.124; speech of Rev. H. de Brisay, Chair of the School Board in the *Oxford Chronicle*, 16.2.1895, 'If children were to be allowed to run the streets with impunity and cultivate habits of irregularity and unpunctuality he thought it was very probable they would become vagrants and possibly criminals.'

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., p.104.

<sup>201</sup> OSB Report 1884.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid. 1884

children were sent to residential industrial schools on request of the Oxford School Board from 1879-1902, while 457 children passed through the Day Industrial School in that time.

The day industrial school was just one aspect of a system of relentless activity in support of school attendance. In one year alone (1884-5), the Board issued over 900 notices of summons, 525 children were spotted out of school and apprehended, 222 visits were paid to schools to follow up children formerly truanting with a further 201 'cautionary visits' made to parents of children on licence from the day industrial school.<sup>203</sup> This work was completed by one School Attendance Officer, with the assistance of the Superintendent of the Day Industrial School. The Board also sent out literally thousands of caution notices to the small businesses and sole traders of Oxford warning them not to employ children without the required certificate.<sup>204</sup> The system was highly visible, well-organised and produced very high levels of attendance by truants on their return to elementary school. At the other end of the process of enforcement – in court, the Board believed the attitudes of magistrates were a significant obstacle to achieving 100% attendance. Although local magistrates had been persuaded to incarcerate a few parents for non-payment of fines in the early years of compulsion, the Board was soon complaining of the reluctance of magistrates to fine parents, with attendance orders or adjournments the more likely outcome.<sup>205</sup> In fact, they discovered that summoning parents to meet with themselves or face a court summons was itself threatening enough to produce an improvement in children's attendance. The prosecution rate was therefore relatively low, but behind this was a mountain of more effective activity to persuade parents of the need to send their children to school regularly.

The Board's strategy was punitive rather than palliative in relation to the poorest families – in the 3 years to 1876, they paid poor children's fees on 71 occasions but did nothing to promote fee support after the responsibility was transferred to the Poor Law Guardians.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid. 1885.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid. 1888 -99 - 1244 notices were issued in 1888 rising to a peak of 2454 in 1899.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid. 1882.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid. 1871, 1872, 1874.

It was the combination of effective surveillance, relentless reminders and visible deterrents which secured the improvement in attendance rates in Oxford's schools – by 1880, the average attendance rate had already reached 77% and five years later, it was 83%. The corresponding figures for England as a whole were 71% and 76%.<sup>207</sup> It was an authoritarian approach, very systematic and with clear short-term penalties for parents and children. The chance of detection of truants was increased by reliable information from the schools – and the efficiency of the Attendance Officer. Even though the courts were not an effective weapon in Oxford, the School Board was able to use its borrowing powers to set up the day industrial school as a visible deterrent in the town, and probably a more effective one, because it targeted the truants themselves. The result was a high level of attendance in Oxford's elementary schools, and a tight rein on costs for the ratepayers.

Clearly Oxford cannot be held to stand for all urban contexts in England. Variation in practice was considerable and the resources of the larger metropolitan areas were vastly greater than in a small town like Oxford. Similarly the challenges were magnified in the larger cities. However, understanding the process of enforcement, both its strengths and weaknesses in a particular context, does allow for some generalised comments on what worked and what did not. One could argue that the Oxford Board had many advantages in its local situation – for instance, long-term commitment from elected members without their energies being distracted by political or religious differences and relatively modest growth in the school population – school enrolments were just over 8,000 by 1900 and average attendance was 87%.<sup>208</sup> Oxford had a good stock of schools already in 1870 and a tradition of elementary schooling supported by the clergy and academics of the city. Oxford had its pockets of poverty and appalling housing, as C.V. Butler charted, and its working-class population was mostly dependent on low-skilled and low-paid service employment for the colleges, but this also brought them into contact with an 'educational' culture.<sup>209</sup> The influence of College patronage over the working-class job

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid. 1881 and 1886; *Parliamentary Papers 1881*, xxxii (2948-1) p.40; *Parliamentary Papers 1886*, xxiv (4849-1), p.43.

<sup>208</sup> OSB Report 1901.

<sup>209</sup> Butler, *Social Conditions*, pp.39-40, 61.

market in Oxford reinforced assumptions about respectable behaviour. The direct influence of College staff over employees, both male and female, tended to reinforce the pressure of the School Board in favour of regular attendance. Neither were there many opportunities for child labour in Oxford. Had the efforts of the School Board made a crucial difference? Of course, this is not easy to judge or quantify, however, a study comparing attendance rates in a similar environment, the city of York, shows that the lower rates of attendance in York's schools were associated with resistance to setting up a school board and a less effective enforcement regime.<sup>210</sup>

### **Bradford case study – a struggle against the odds**

The Bradford story is a less successful one – a tale of a progressive authority struggling against the pressure of an industrial economy with low wages and a long history of child labour institutionalised in half-time schooling. Chart 6 overleaf shows clearly however that despite these disadvantages, attendance rates in Bradford did improve over time, tracking consistently below the annual average attendance for Oxford and closing the gap between them in the late 1890s and early twentieth century.

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<sup>210</sup> Sheldon, "Policing Truancy", p.56.

## Comparison of Average Attendance 1873-1902

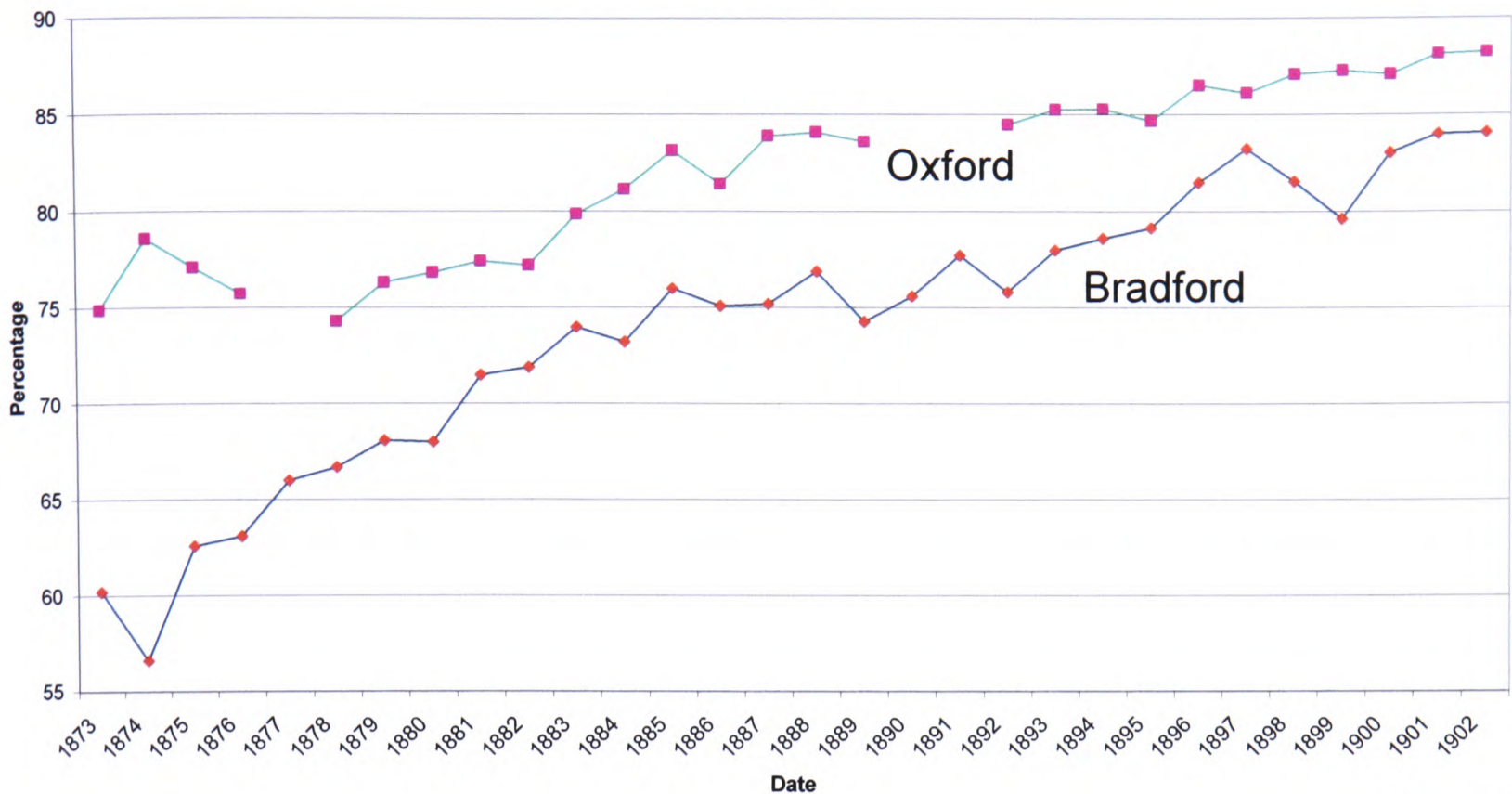


Chart 6

Sources: Oxford School Board Annual Reports 1873-1902 (1890-1 missing); Bradford School Board Attendance Committee Minutes 1874-9; Bradford School Board Triennial Reports 1882-1902

Bradford had a progressive school board which had introduced bye-laws on school attendance in 1874. It was also a board that had to provide many new school places in the 1870s due to the effects of rapid population growth. By 1875, the Board had already provided 7,000 extra places in new board schools, but attendance was no more than 64% and only 60% in the church schools.<sup>211</sup> The members exhibited the same ideas and motivations as the Oxford Board – a concern about ‘street Arab’ children, and those in moral or physical danger, and a conviction of the benefits of elementary education for the local population.<sup>212</sup> However, they were constantly brought up against the argument that family incomes customarily included the earnings of women and children. The worsted textile trade with its many subsidiary industrial processes was supremely dominant in the town. The process of absorbing many poor immigrants created a demand for Catholic schools which was met – but these schools tended to concentrate the poorest children.

<sup>211</sup> BradSBAC Minutes, June 1875.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid. 10.12.1878.

The Board monitored the pattern of visits to absentees' homes and the committal of children to industrial school by religion. Their information clearly shows that Roman Catholic children were much more likely to be visited by the school attendance officer, and to be committed to an industrial school than protestant ones.<sup>213</sup> The sheer mobility of the population within Bradford and its surrounding area added to the practical problems in terms of monitoring absences and on top of this, there was both employer and parental interest in retaining the half-time system in the form to which they had become accustomed since the 1830s – that is to say, allowing children from the age of 10 or 11 to work half-days in the local mills and alternate attendance at school, mornings one week and afternoons the next. In 1890, approximately 17% of the total elementary school population of Bradford were enrolled as half time scholars – if one assumes 5 school years between entry and leaving for the majority of children, it means almost all children were going half-time by age 11.<sup>214</sup> This caused a number of problems for the School Board. It was difficult to monitor children aged 10 or over on the streets during school time as they could be going to or from work. More than this, the habit of early leaving for mill-work led to a higher level of half-time leaving for other forms of work in Bradford. High rates of female employment in Bradford tended to reduce the ability of parents to supervise younger children and ensure they attended school. All together, the situation fostered a culture in which schooling was less prominent within family routines and also less likely to be a priority for parents or children.<sup>215</sup>

There was therefore a strong incentive to compromise for the Bradford School Board. The educational effects of half-time were the subject of great criticism from middle-class commentators by the 1890s, but in Bradford, half-time was completely embedded in the school system, accepted by teachers – perhaps reluctantly, but nonetheless as the expected pattern. In 1880, the Board estimated that half of the children in the city's schools would not reach Standard III before the age of 10 when they would expect to

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<sup>213</sup> BradSB *Triennial Reports* 1895-7 schedule of children/parents summoned up to Oct. 1897.

<sup>214</sup> James Pressley, "Aspects of the Half-Time System in Bradford and District 1870-1922" (unpublished MA Thesis, Lancaster University, 1994), Appendix A.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

leave for half-time work.<sup>216</sup> Unfortunately, the Board had already set the rather unrealistic level of Standard V in their original bye-laws to qualify for half-time exemption from school. They came under pressure from the Education Department to enforce Standard V, a clearly unenforceable policy in the local circumstances, so they pleaded to be allowed to reduce the qualification for leaving to Standard II as the one ‘suitable to the circumstances of the District’ and in this they were supported by the local teachers’ association.<sup>217</sup> In the end, they compromised by awarding half-time certificates to those children who had already gone to work half-time and were allowed to adopt Standard II for future half-time exemptions. The Board also set up four special ‘half-time’ schools to enable these children to be taught separately from those staying on full-time – this was a response not only to the need for lessons to be repeated in the mornings and afternoons for half-timers, but also to accommodate the lower standard which half-timers were able to achieve in the time available at school.

The preponderance of the worsted industry and the fact that the system of child labour in place had already received legislative ‘approval’ meant the Board had little leverage for change. Parents accepted ‘the rules of the game’ as far as schooling was concerned, but they were unwilling to have new conditions imposed on them. Thus in 1886 when the Board raised the Standard required from II to III, ‘Considerable agitation was caused in the town . . . , many strenuously opposing through misapprehension of the circumstances of the case.’<sup>218</sup> The combination of widespread support for children’s half-time work and the social problems associated with a mobile population and a low wage economy presented practical obstacles to the sort of attendance rates seen in Oxford.

However, poor school attendance in Bradford was not simply a result of the influence of child labour – social problems were more acute than in county towns such as Oxford, and more akin to those in the great metropolitan areas. For instance, the Board was aware of girls absent from school who were involved in prostitution as well as boys beyond the control of their parents – the response was to place them in residential industrial schools.

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<sup>216</sup> BradSBAC *Minutes* 13.1.1880.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.* 24.2.1880.

<sup>218</sup> BradSB *Triennial Reports* 1886-8.

‘These require to be under entire control, away from their worthless parents and evil surroundings.’<sup>219</sup> The Board faced practical problems in virtually every area of action open to it for enforcing attendance – it had no industrial or truant school of its own, and had borrowed heavily to build new board schools. The Board also continued to give support to families with very low incomes by paying for school fees, especially during periods of trade depression. They expressed concern when the local Guardians used a less generous scale and refused to remit the fees of children at Board schools in Bradford.<sup>220</sup> Both schools and factory inspectors did little to co-operate over school attendance data in the early 1870s and the courts were unsupportive, so prosecution provided no realistic deterrent for most parents.<sup>221</sup> The Education Department wanted a tougher approach to the employment of children despite court judgements which the Board argued undermined their attempts to prosecute parents who withdrew their children from school to send them to work. This led to exasperation and mistrust between central and local government.<sup>222</sup> Enforcement of attendance on the ground carried more tension than in many other places, even when compared with a larger city such as Leeds. There were regular verbal and physical attacks on School Attendance Officers by parents – in fact, the Board published a list of ‘special cases’ in each of its Triennial Reports in order both to illustrate their difficulties and hopefully to deter future attacks.<sup>223</sup>

Bradford faced an unusually difficult conjunction of circumstances which hindered the enforcement of school attendance – its population was highly transient as the city acted as a magnet for immigrants seeking low-paid work in the mills. Reliance on essentially one branch of the textile trade left its economy liable to periodic trade shocks and undermined employment stability for adults. At the same time, the tradition of child employment persisted and was established within the framework of the half-time system. Bradford was one of the dirtiest, dampest and unhealthiest cities in the country and lacked the

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<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.* 1883-5.

<sup>220</sup> *BradSBAC Minutes* Numbers of children supported rose from the usual 350-400 to 858 in December 1880. Opposition to Guardians’ policies 25.1.1881 and 13.12.1881.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.* 30.12.1873, 17.12.1874, 13.4.1875, 3.3.1885 – although co-operation with factory inspectors over half-timers’ attendance did improve, see 27.10.1874.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.* 24.2.1880; *BradSB Triennial Reports* 1883-5.

<sup>223</sup> *BradSBAC Minutes* 22.1.1884 death of SAO Beevers due to fractured skull; *BradSB Triennial Reports* 1895-7 lists 6 of these special cases.

amenities to maintain good child health in its unsanitary back-to-back housing stock.<sup>224</sup> All of these factors were likely to retard levels of school attendance, despite the action taken by the Board.

However, impressive early progress was still made in Bradford, as enrolments increased rapidly and attendance levels climbed sharply from a baseline of 62.2% in 1875, when only 7,419 children were on the registers of a public elementary school in the city. By 1881, there were 17,355 children on the registers and attendance in Bradford's schools averaged 71.5%, including half-timers. By 1891, the school roll had grown to 25,395 with an average attendance of 77.7%. During the latter year alone, the school attendance officers had made more than 24,000 house to house visits, plus more than 5,000 other meetings with parents and had picked up 4,500 children off the streets to return them to school, yet only 990 cases went forward to a court summons.<sup>225</sup> By 1900, school rolls had grown further to 32,000 with average attendance at 83%. It was a year which formed a high point in enforcement activity with more than 10,000 children returned to school from the streets.<sup>226</sup> But from this point onwards, court summonses declined. It was not the end of the struggle for school attendance in Bradford by any means, as the figures for average attendance levelled off after 1900 and half-time increased in popularity. However, the evidence points to the crucial impact of the School Board on attendance despite the formidable barriers in the local context.

### **Rural enforcement – collusion and common interest**

Historians have commonly portrayed the enforcement of school attendance in rural areas as largely a failure of will in the face of powerful social tradition, economic interest and a general 'backwardness' of attitude towards the value of elementary education for the children of the rural poor.<sup>227</sup> The impression given by contemporary sources, particularly

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<sup>224</sup> Barbara Thompson, "Infant Mortality in Bradford", in Robert Woods and John Woodward (eds.), *Urban Disease and Mortality in Nineteenth Century England* (London: Batsford, 1984), p.140.

<sup>225</sup> BradSB *Triennial Reports* 1889-91.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.* 1898-1900.

<sup>227</sup> Horn, *Rural England* and Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, but Bailey, "The Effects of the 1870 Education Act in Buckinghamshire", presents a mixed picture.

the reports of HMIs, was of lax attendance monitoring, little active enforcement and much complacency by local authorities. It would be reasonable to assume therefore that attendance rates in the countryside were much lower than in the towns. However, there are no published figures for school attendance specifically applying to rural areas. The county figures published by the Education Department bring together the statistics for both urban and rural areas within each county, and so hide variations in the attendance rates. It is nonetheless possible to track trends in rural school attendance by focusing on the data for largely agricultural counties, such as Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, where demographic change was limited and the effects of industrial development minimal.<sup>228</sup>

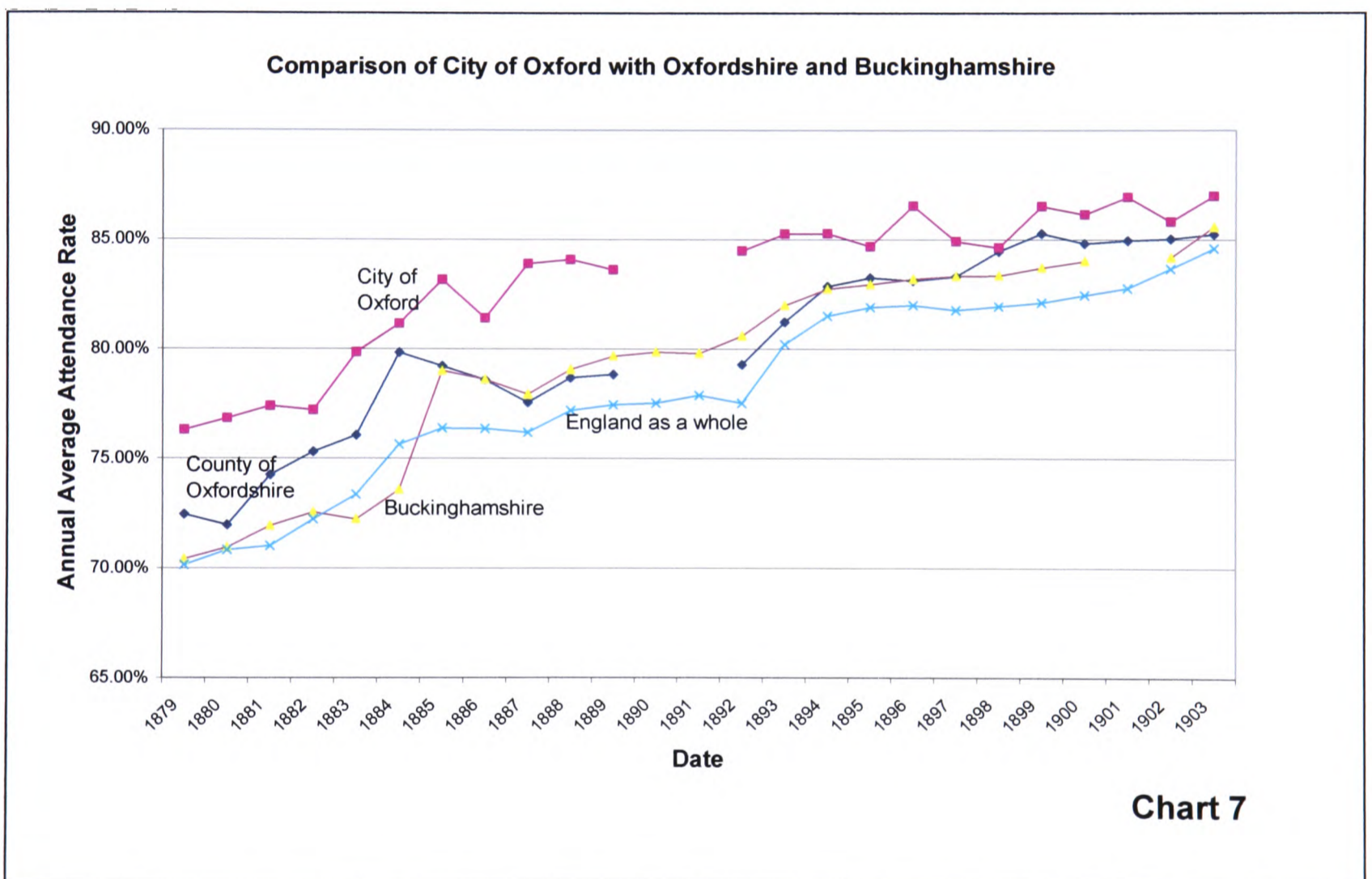


Chart 7

Sources: Oxford School Board Annual Reports 1871-1902; Committee of Council on Education Annual Reports 1879-99; Board of Education Annual Reports 1900-03.

<sup>228</sup> Arguably, this is a 'broad brush' approach, as the two counties concerned included many small towns and even suburban development in the case of Buckinghamshire.

Chart 7 compares the figures for the county of Buckinghamshire (including its towns) with those for rural Oxfordshire and for the city of Oxford, whose figures have been abstracted from the county in order to provide a comparison between the city and its surrounding rural districts. The school populations for both counties were very close in size and increased at roughly the same (limited) rate over the period 1879-1900.<sup>229</sup> In Oxfordshire, there was a rise in attendance in both the city and the rural areas after 1879, but the trend for rural Oxfordshire after 1884 mirrored that of England as a whole rather than the city. The mid-1880s saw the biting effects of agricultural depression which coincided with a plateau in attendance in both Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire. Buckinghamshire had a more varied economy than Oxfordshire, having had a tradition of domestic lace-making and straw plaiting. These were moribund industries by the 1870s, but still exerted some influence on the attendance of girls in the early years of compulsion.<sup>230</sup> This could explain the reason for Buckinghamshire's weaker school attendance in 1879, but by 1885, attendance rates there had caught up with those in Oxfordshire. The story from then on is one of convergence as rates in Buckinghamshire closely followed those in Oxfordshire. Attendance overall rose again following the ending of school fees, which seems to have had a positive impact on attendance in the rural schools but not in the city of Oxford. By the end of the century, another plateau had been reached at around 85%, which was closer to the city's attendance rate. There had been a process of 'catch-up' in the rural areas but it is hardly detectable in the standard history of rural education.

School attendance in rural areas has been portrayed by historians as highly problematic. Hurt highlights the fiercely hostile views of the farming interest towards compulsory schooling, due to its interference with farmers' needs for a supply of cheap labour and to agricultural labourers' low incomes. These led to a 'confluence of social and economic factors (which) ensured the unpopularity of the education acts in the countryside at all levels of society.'<sup>231</sup> Although he portrays attitudes on a spectrum from apathy to passive

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<sup>229</sup> In 1879, Oxfordshire's schools had 28,390 children on roll increasing to 34,603 by 1900. The equivalent figures for Buckinghamshire were 30,216 and 37,875.

<sup>230</sup> Bailey, "The Effects of the 1870 Education Act in Buckinghamshire", pp.273-4.

<sup>231</sup> Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, p.200.

resistance to schooling, he also recognises that some farmers supported the provision of elementary schooling and felt that if they had to pay school rates, then children should be made to attend.<sup>232</sup> Whilst agreeing with the general picture of high levels of irregular attendance in rural schools, Pam Horn stresses the negative impact of ill-health and the pull of employment opportunities as the key factors reducing children's attendance in the 1870s and 80s, in addition to the many concessions in the law, which allowed children to work in agriculture from age 10 and on an occasional basis from the age of 8.<sup>233</sup> Both agree that enforcement was critical to changing both attitudes and behaviour but in most places it was inadequate or even wilfully negligent.<sup>234</sup> Finally, Horn in particular, but also Hurt by implication, suggest that the conditions affecting rural school attendance had not significantly improved by the end of the century.<sup>235</sup>

There are two issues which arise from this analysis of rural school attendance. Firstly, there is the question as to whether the picture painted by these standard histories can be treated as an accurate generalisation about elementary education in all rural areas before 1900 (although both authors agree that local circumstances significantly affected levels of attendance). Secondly, there is the issue of attendance levels themselves; for if attendance problems really were as bad as has been portrayed, why were the overall levels of school attendance recorded in the Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire data not much worse than appears to be the case?

In rural areas, the priorities of the enforcement agencies *were* very different from those in the towns. Moral or social concerns about the control of children's behaviour and time were not apparent – instead, local authorities generally tried to balance the needs of the local agricultural community with the government's requirements. They did not want trouble from 'on high', but often the threat of action by the Department was remote, both geographically and practically, and weighed little against the immediate needs of the local community. What might be termed 'defeatist strategies' were really just lines of

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<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, p.201.

<sup>233</sup> Horn, *Rural England*, pp.136-39.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, p.138; Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, pp.202-3.

<sup>235</sup> Horn, *Rural England*, pp.266-9; Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, p.203.

least resistance both to government and to the agricultural interest. Called into existence by central government, many of the smaller rural school attendance committees and even elected school boards lacked the sense of legitimacy and educational purpose of many urban local authorities. This is amply illustrated by the way in which some attendance committees in East Yorkshire simply failed to meet or lapsed and had to be ‘revived’ by the Department.<sup>236</sup> In a study of school attendance in three Oxfordshire parishes up to 1891, the school log books contained not a single mention of a visit by an attendance officer.<sup>237</sup> A lack of urgency and failure to monitor or even appoint school attendance officers typified some authorities, leading to complaints from schools and HMIs. In his report for 1878, Mr Kenney Herbert, HMI, described the situation relating to elementary education in Buckinghamshire as ‘very behindhand’, yet he was also optimistic that the provision of schools would increase children’s participation.<sup>238</sup> However, after more than 20 years of visiting schools in the county, disillusionment had set in and his report for 1899 was highly critical of the local authorities and magistrates, complaining they had no interest in improving attendance.<sup>239</sup> Frustration often led to a lack of trust between school staff and attendance committees, even to complete non-co-operation on occasion.<sup>240</sup> The Bicester Attendance Committee, for instance, put pressure on parents in the village of Wendlebury to send their children to school only after persistent harrying by the Rev. H.A. Pickard, HMI. The Committee argued that the absence of a certified school in the village gave parents a legitimate excuse to evade the law.<sup>241</sup> Pickard continued to complain to and about the Bicester Committee for over a year – he reported them to the Education Department for failing to stop boys going to work without labour certificates and encouraged local school managers also to complain about their lax enforcement of the bye-laws.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Davison, "Enforcing School Attendance in the East Riding of Yorkshire", pp.18-19.

<sup>237</sup> C.G. Elliott, "The School and the Family: Patterns of Educational Interaction in Four Communities, 1861-91" (unpublished DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 1986), p.270.

<sup>238</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1878*, xxviii (2048), p.473; Bailey, "Rural School Boards: Buckinghamshire", p.33.

<sup>239</sup> Bailey, "The Effects of the 1870 Education Act in Buckinghamshire", p.304.

<sup>240</sup> Buckingham School Attendance Committee BuSAC *Minutes* 8.8.1896; Eton School Attendance Committee EtSAC *Minutes* 19.10.1886.

<sup>241</sup> BiSAC *Mins.* 24.6.1881, 22.7.1881.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.* 26.5.1882, 21.7.1882, 10.11.1882, 25.5.1883.

Unlike their urban counterparts, most rural local authorities did not perceive it as a wider social problem if children were irregular in attending school – they were not causing a nuisance in the streets, were unlikely to become juvenile delinquents and most likely to be working in the local economy, either at home or on a neighbouring farm, to support what were by the 1880s precarious family incomes. The conviction of farmers that child labour was essential to their business and of parents that they needed their children to earn tended to solidify attitudes within the attendance committee and amongst the rural working classes.<sup>243</sup> By 1878, out of 36 parishes with school boards in Oxfordshire, only 12 had any bye-laws on school attendance. In Buckinghamshire, the situation was much the same with 33 school boards in place, but only 14 with bye-laws.<sup>244</sup> The lone dissident voices asking for more enforcement of school attendance tended to be those of clergymen and teachers who for their own reasons needed children to attend their church schools.<sup>245</sup> One attendance committee refused to act in response to a Buckinghamshire vicar's agitation for more enforcement activity at his parish school, commenting that Rev. Meara, 'appears to care more for a good grant than for the respect of his parishioners'.<sup>246</sup>

The story of the countryside was mainly one of accommodation by the local authority of what the community would accept. This is nicely revealed in a quotation from the report of HMI Brodie in 1877. He had received a letter from the Rev. W. Lea of Droitwich setting out the school managers' usual practice of allowing 'a regular seven attendances in the week' (out of a possible 10)...After three years' experience, I find that bad attendance is confined to a few families; we have little trouble with the others, though there is always more difficulty with girls than boys or infants, as they are so useful at home. If for instance, the mother is confined, I always allow the eldest girl to stay at home for a fortnight. Many children marked absent are not really away, but they come late or are sent home for their pence; we are obliged to do this with some families or the pence would never be paid. We seldom are obliged to summon parents now, and when it is the case, it is always the same families over again, or newcomers who don't understand

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<sup>243</sup> Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, p.200.

<sup>244</sup> Bailey, "The Effects of the 1870 Education Act in Buckinghamshire", pp.284.

<sup>245</sup> EtSAC *Bucks Minutes* 19.7.1881, 28.7.1885.

<sup>246</sup> Winslow School Attendance Committee WinSAC *Minutes* 28.11.1883.

our ways.’<sup>247</sup> Clearly a bargain had been struck between the school attendance committee and the parents in the locality, a *modus operandi* designed to accommodate family needs and a culturally-acceptable level of attendance. Some local authorities came into conflict with the Department over modifications to the model bye-laws, which they felt reflected the different needs of rural children or over their unwillingness to prosecute.<sup>248</sup> The Department became so frustrated with the inactivity of one Buckinghamshire authority, they instructed them to issue 20 summonses against the parent of a persistent truant to prove they were actually doing their job.<sup>249</sup>

Practical obstacles as well as ways of thinking about education tended to undermine the enforcement of school attendance, even when whole families of children failed to attend school regularly. The School Attendance Officer for Banbury announced his enforcement policy to the School Attendance Committee in April 1878 in the following terms, ‘It would not be wise to summon before the Committee the parents of all the children whose absence from school is indicated. Cases of systematic and wilful neglect I shall follow closely and bring before this Committee in due course.’<sup>250</sup> Limited resources made effective enforcement very difficult, even when it was attempted. Travel to scattered schools and homes and limited time for attendance monitoring were problems for rural attendance officers, who were often appointed part-time in addition to several other roles.<sup>251</sup> For instance, George Dew, school attendance officer for Lower Heyford, Oxfordshire from 1877 was primarily a poor law relieving officer, and also local registrar of births and deaths, vaccination officer, agent for the Royal Insurance Society, inspector of nuisances for the sanitary authority, inspector of canal boats, collector of poor rates and church rates, in addition to his school attendance work. Mr Dew was attentive to his work, however, and a leading advocate of the introduction of attendance bye-laws in his own parish. In 1881, he bought a tricycle to help him in his work, but the dispersed population provided both a cover and an excuse for the persistence of non-attendance and

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<sup>247</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1878*, xxviii (2048), p.421.

<sup>248</sup> e.g. *EtSAC Bucks Minutes* series of correspondence throughout 1891 from the Education Department.

<sup>249</sup> *WinSAC Bucks Minutes* 29.1.1890.

<sup>250</sup> *Banbury School Attendance Committee BaSAC Minutes* 26.4.1878.

<sup>251</sup> There are exceptions - Pottersbury Union, Bucks. employed a full-time attendance officer Pottersbury School Attendance Committee *PotSac Minutes* 24.2.1887 as did Thame - Thame School Attendance Committee *ThSAC Minutes* 17.12.1896 shows the salary paid to theirs was £65 p.a.

illegal working on farms.<sup>252</sup> When rural local authorities were called upon to deal with farmers and even clergymen for employing children before the legal age, it was often in the form of a polite reminder, though parents were sometimes prosecuted for removing their own children from school under age and employing them.<sup>253</sup>

Government itself treated agriculture as an exceptional category within the legislation, by allowing the suspension of schooling for 6 weeks each summer to allow children to harvest and this was adjusted in each local area depending on the weather. The requirements for early leaving in rural areas tended more or less universally to be at the minimum level, age 10 up to 1893 and although the Department recommended Standard IV as the level for a labour certificate, many rural parishes passed bye-laws which allowed early leaving with Standards II or III and there was pressure to reduce these even further during the 1880s.<sup>254</sup> This is an indication of the very low level of attainment usually achieved by children in small village schools, but it is not surprising. The Bicester Attendance Committee commented on a list of irregular attenders from the managers of the town's National Schools, that 'those particular cases were within the class incorrigible or where children were sickly and incapable of the reception of tuition through disease or semi-starvation.'<sup>255</sup> However, in some respects employment opportunities for children moved in the 'right' direction for school attendance, as domestic production became uncompetitive – for instance, as happened in the cottage lace and straw plait industries of Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire by the 1880s.<sup>256</sup> Despite objections from some school boards to the increases in the school leaving age in 1893 and 1899, attendance of older children was enforced in both Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire.<sup>257</sup> In Buckingham Union, attendance officers were given regular access to school registers from 1895 and more detailed information on attendance percentages

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<sup>252</sup> Horn (ed.), *Diaries of George Dew*, pp.5-11.

<sup>253</sup> ThSAC *Mins.* 4.10.1900 – illegal employment by a vicar, 3.5.1900 illegal employment by a parent; BuSAC *Bucks Minutes* 5.5.1877 – parents prosecuted for employing their sons.

<sup>254</sup> BiSAC *Mins.* 7.11.1884.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.* 21.7.1882.

<sup>256</sup> Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, p.198.

<sup>257</sup> BuSAC *Bucks Minutes* 16.5.1896 letter from Winslow Union, 'consider the age limit fixed at twelve years ... will be a great hardship in agricultural districts'; but PotSac *Bucks Minutes* 6.7.1893 and EtSAC *Bucks Minutes* 20.2.1894 refusal to allow children to leave school aged 12 or 13 without passing Standard IV.

from 1898.<sup>258</sup> In Newport Pagnell, there was pressure from some schools to raise the leaving age and by 1900, the Attendance Committee had shifted to acceptance of 13 as the accepted leaving age for rural children, though they resisted any suggestion that bye-laws should cover children up to age 14.<sup>259</sup> Bicester Attendance Committee's decision, taken after protracted discussion, not to increase the exemption qualification for early leavers from Standard IV to V was the result of the Chair's casting vote only.<sup>260</sup> Though there was still great sensitivity to local feelings in favour of early leaving, this evidence indicates a gradual popular acceptance of the national policy to increase the number of years of schooling and growing boldness to tackle attendance problems.

By the late 1890s, the gap in attendance between the best and the worst counties was closing and most rural counties were achieving levels near the national average. There is evidence that attention was being paid to improving attendance, both by the introduction of prize and reward schemes and by a somewhat firmer attitude on the part of some magistrates.<sup>261</sup> If it is the case that before the late 1890s, there was little change in the enforcement of attendance bye-laws and a continued acceptance of frequent interruptions to school attendance to accommodate seasonal work, how can the upward trend be explained?<sup>262</sup> Partly it was due to compensating factors in some rural areas which encouraged school attendance. Already by 1858, Oxfordshire had 426 schools, most of them small rural schools with limited facilities, but certainly accessible to the local population and adequate to meet the demand for school places. The availability of schools itself increased participation in schooling, though not necessarily regular attendance.<sup>263</sup> Although autobiographical accounts of rural schooling confirm its limitations, Flora Thompson claimed that regular attendance had become established in her Oxfordshire village by the 1880s.<sup>264</sup> A study of three Oxfordshire villages for the decade earlier confirms that most agricultural labourers could afford to send their

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<sup>258</sup> BuSAC *Bucks Minutes* 26.1.1895, 28.5.1898.

<sup>259</sup> Newport Pagnell School Attendance Committee NPSAC *Minutes* 27.12.1900, 23.1.1901.

<sup>260</sup> BiSAC *Mins.* 19.7.1895-11.10.1895.

<sup>261</sup> Davison, "Enforcing School Attendance in the East Riding of Yorkshire", pp.24, 28.

<sup>262</sup> Horn, *Rural England*, pp.266-9; Davison, "Enforcing School Attendance in the East Riding of Yorkshire", pp.17-23.

<sup>263</sup> Elliott, "School and Family", pp.24, 27.

<sup>264</sup> Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), p.187.

children to school and most did so.<sup>265</sup> The small size of rural schools, their relatively low fees, the lack of social distinctions between or within schools, and most of all the influence of the local clergy all helped to support attendance in less obvious ways than the formal enforcement machinery. And not all rural local authorities failed in their duties – there were examples of keen rural school boards and progressive individuals who believed in the value of education for the poor. However, enforcement was always done pragmatically, in recognition of the social sensitivities and economic necessities of the agricultural economy.<sup>266</sup> A cautious approach to prosecution of non-attenders did not always signify a lack of interest in promoting elementary education or improving the quality of provision for rural children by the building of new schools.<sup>267</sup> Even in rural areas, schooling was seen as a positive influence on village society and a remedy for anti-social behaviour. George Dew, in his rounds of the Oxfordshire countryside as both relieving officer and attendance officer, recorded his satisfaction at the following case. ‘Richard Brock (son of Frederick Brock) aged 11 years, was summoned before the Magistrates at Bicester today by me for throwing a stone and cutting my horse’s head while he was grazing. None of this family ever go to school and they are complete pests to the village.’<sup>268</sup>

Pam Horn has argued that rural schools suffered high levels of absenteeism due to illness but the contrary may well be the case.<sup>269</sup> Although rural schools were affected by epidemic disease, which spread easily in poorly-ventilated single-room schools, the number of children infected would be limited by the small size of the individual school. In towns, an infectious disease could decimate a school of several hundred children and lead to the closure of others due to the close contact between children attending different schools from the same neighbourhood. This was less likely in dispersed rural populations, though the effect of poor nutritional status on children’s health cannot be discounted. One of the commonest health-related causes of absence mentioned in school attendance

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<sup>265</sup> Elliott, "School and Family", p.105.

<sup>266</sup> Bailey, "Rural School Boards: Buckinghamshire", pp.31-4 defends the record of many of the Buckinghamshire school boards.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid. p.26.

<sup>268</sup> Horn (ed.), *Diaries of George Dew*, p.69.

<sup>269</sup> Horn, *Rural England*, pp.136-7.

minutes was 'bad feet' – an unsurprising complaint for children walking to school without boots in all weathers.<sup>270</sup> Some of the obstacles to attendance by the poor which hindered urban authorities were on the other hand absent in the countryside. The worst attendance rates were concentrated in the industrial towns of the north and midlands, where child labour was institutionalised in the half-time system and in those areas, higher rates of school attendance were recorded in the surrounding countryside.<sup>271</sup> Hurt has pointed out that it was the attraction of unregulated workshop employment or domestic industry which led initially to poor school attendance in some rural areas, though eventually it was squeezed out by a combination of legislation and industrial change.<sup>272</sup> And in some counties, like Oxfordshire, cottage industry had hardly existed anyway. In the countryside, boys tended to leave school at 11 to work on the land, but for older girls and most children under 11, interruptions to schooling were temporary and seasonal. Clearly the needs of agricultural work affected attendance rates, but to a limited extent as the school year, and in particular the summer holiday, ensured children were officially off school when most needed on the land. Holidays were often moved or granted at short notice to accommodate the peak harvesting time.<sup>273</sup>

A number of conclusions about rural attendance can be tentatively stated. Firstly, the evidence seems to indicate that although enforcement of attendance was less attentive and less well-resourced in many rural areas, overall levels of school attendance were not significantly lower than in towns due to the lax enforcement regime. Instead, other less direct social influences helped maintain attendance in agricultural areas. Secondly, the *overall* average attendance rate for rural schools rose to a level only marginally below the average for urban schools by the 1890s, despite the continuing demands of the agrarian economy for children's participation on a seasonal basis. Since many of these seasonal absences had by then been accommodated either by authorised holiday periods or by the legal provisions which allowed early leaving for boys entering agricultural work, they did not significantly affect the average attendance level recorded by the Education

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<sup>270</sup> BaSAC *Mins.* 13.9.1878, 14.2.1879, 15.9.1879; Elliott, "School and Family", pp.259-60.

<sup>271</sup> Roger Noel Leighton, "Variations in Elementary School Attendance in a Rural Area of South-West Lancashire, 1851-71" (unpublished MA thesis, Liverpool, 1981), p.85.

<sup>272</sup> Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, pp.196-7.

<sup>273</sup> WinSAC *Bucks Minutes* 29.7.1898, 13.7.1900.

Department. These conclusions do not negate the examples of poor attendance which historians have highlighted, but they do modify the picture of rural school attendance in the later nineteenth century. Yet the criticism of rural enforcement continued from the Department for Education, supported by many school inspectors.<sup>274</sup> In a stinging rebuke in their Annual Report for 1898, the Department declared ‘so grave, however, are the dangers which spring from [the rural local authorities’] ... insensibility towards the claims of education, and so materially does the attitude of some districts hinder the general desire for increased educational efficiency, that we feel it necessary to direct further notice to the question, in the belief that discussion and inquiry will help to dissipate some of the lethargy which prevails.’<sup>275</sup> Although the Department was willing also to condemn ‘parental selfishness’ for the early entry of so many children to the labour market, they reserved particular criticism for ‘others in responsible positions ... interested in obtaining cheap child labour at certain times of the year.’<sup>276</sup> For HMIs the issue was the low level of attainment in rural schools, where few got beyond standard III or IV.<sup>277</sup> For the Department the issue was somewhat different – many rural local authorities had for years ignored its authority over enforcing school attendance and had rejected the urban, even ‘London-centred’, view of the value of mass education. The Department expected as much from the agricultural labourers and their families, but the collusion of the rural upper classes seemed to them a betrayal of public duty as well as a snub to central government authority.

### **Truancy and school attendance – a pinch-point of class relations**

The impact of the enforcement process should not be assessed simply in terms of its effect on the statistics of school attendance. As Jane Martin has observed, ‘State-provided schooling ... effectively accentuates the double edged element of power underpinning relations between those in authority and those over whom they wielded that authority –

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<sup>274</sup> E.g. *Parliamentary Papers 1901*, xix (756), reports of HMIs E. Roberts p.79, J.Armine Willis pp.130-1, 133.

<sup>275</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1898*, xxii (8986), p.83.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, p.84.

<sup>277</sup> Thompson, *Lark Rise*, p.184 – in urban schools the top class was usually Standard VI or VII.

the working-class parental consumer and the child client.<sup>278</sup> The keenness of local authorities to pursue truants and improve school attendance was a product of a particular set of beliefs about the benefits of schooling and costs of allowing families to avoid conforming to the law. The process of ‘converting’ parents to regular school attendance by means of active enforcement also had a long-lasting effect on the relationship between the state and the family. The enforcement process created new roles, new functions and a new forum for interaction between local middle-class elites and working-class families. The logical outcome was increased intervention in the family to achieve the limited but incrementally expanding social and educational goals of the state.

The middle classes demonstrated a range of attitudes in their confrontations with the parents of truants. Rubinstein has pointed to the idealism of some members of London’s School Board.<sup>279</sup> The ‘educational mission’ was evident amongst the academics of the Oxford School Board, but these motives were less prominent on other provincial local authorities.<sup>280</sup> More striking than these progressive concerns was the consistency of the fears and frustrations which underpinned the commitment to enforce school attendance. The fear of unsupervised children on the streets frequently occurred in discussions by urban school attendance committees.<sup>281</sup> Membership of school attendance committees and school boards was overwhelmingly the preserve of the middle classes, people who had no experience of elementary schooling themselves, and with a common set of views about the need for discipline and social order. A general concern, frequently voiced in towns, was the need to ‘clear the streets’ and ensure the ‘waifs and wastrels’ were in school under control rather than up to mischief.<sup>282</sup> Several authorities appointed special attendance officers to roam the streets searching out truants who were returned to school and whose circumstances were then investigated.<sup>283</sup> Frustrations with the local magistracy were felt more keenly where concern was highest about the problem of children on the streets. Fears of this kind were a major motivating force behind the

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<sup>278</sup> Martin, *Women and Schooling*, p.94.

<sup>279</sup> Rubinstein, "London School Board", p.242.

<sup>280</sup> *Oxford Chronicle* 28.1.1871 includes the election address of Eleanor Smith.

<sup>281</sup> YSAC Mins. 17.8.1877, 13.5.1878, 9.11.1881; Leeds School Board *LSB Minutes* 9.12.1880.

<sup>282</sup> YSAC Mins. 17.8.1877; LSBAC *Leeds Attendance Committee* 30.8.1876; Hendrick, *Child Welfare*, p.32.

<sup>283</sup> YSAC Mins. 13.5.1878, 9.11.1888; LSBAC *Leeds Attendance Committee* 27.6.1879.

enforcement of school attendance by most urban school boards and attendance committees, though expenditures on attendance officers, court cases and residential schools were always tempered by the pressure from ratepayers to reduce costs.<sup>284</sup> The fears felt by the middle classes were to some extent balanced by an understanding of the effects of trade cycles or other crises outside their control on working-class families from time to time, but in general the effects of poverty were largely discounted.<sup>285</sup> Non-attendance was often attributed to ‘careless parents’, demoralising surroundings or lack of supervision of children.<sup>286</sup>

In this cause, most urban attendance committee members were willing to commit many evenings and Saturday mornings to interviewing parents and reviewing cases on top of the regular meetings of the committee. This energetic approach was far more evident in towns and cities than in rural areas.<sup>287</sup> Discussions about truancy often reinforced the members’ views about the short-sightedness or apathy of the working-classes but also increased their desire to gather information. The Oxford School Board as early as 1872 reported that ‘the knowledge of the child-population of Oxford possessed by the Committee is becoming more complete.’<sup>288</sup> Local authority members’ views were also influenced by their perceptions of the particular problems in their own community and by current ideas about appropriate parental responsibilities and priorities, in relation to both schooling and child labour.<sup>289</sup> This is indicated by the exemption standards they included in the bye-laws and by their policies on half-time employment. Policies towards persistent absence could be paternalistic or punitive, but in urban contexts, they were increasingly fuelled by the conviction that truancy led to juvenile delinquency. Bradford School Board for instance included in its 1897 report, under the heading *School versus Crime*, a comparison of the fall in the number of juvenile offenders with the increases in

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<sup>284</sup> Rubinstein, *School Attendance*, p.31; YSAC Mins. 8.1.1883 ‘Wilkinson’s Queries’ – a series of questions about the committee’s spending decisions.

<sup>285</sup> YSAC Mins. 29.4.1878, 10.11.1879 notes effect of trade depressions on children’s attendance but more typical is OSB Report 1879 on ‘vigorous measures’ to recover contributions to costs from parents of children in the day industrial school.

<sup>286</sup> YSAC Mins. 12.11.1883 lists reasons for poor attendance including weather and ‘capricious removals’.

<sup>287</sup> Rubinstein, "London School Board", pp.245-6.

<sup>288</sup> OSB Report 1872.

<sup>289</sup> Martin, *Women and Schooling*, p.10.

the number of children on the registers of public elementary schools and their attendance at school.<sup>290</sup> There was also a growing belief by the end of the century that truancy had a ‘contaminating’ effect on other children, as truants incited other children to follow them into habits of petty crime and delinquency.<sup>291</sup> Thus, dealing with the parents of truants and ultimately removing children from a home or environment judged to be inadequate was seen as a sort of social mission, designed to contribute to a wider attack on disorder and crime and to safeguard other children.

The enforcement of school attendance was also clearly directed at the working classes and this added to the distance between the classes on those occasions when they came into contact. There was a clear definition of those schools covered by the law on compulsory attendance and the population to which it applied, that is to say public elementary schools certified as ‘efficient’ by the state and charging less than 9d weekly for attendance.<sup>292</sup> In fact, elementary school fees were usually levied at a rate of 2d to 6d, depending on the age of the child and the ‘catchment area’ of the school. The clear legal definition gave substance to the idea that the imposition of compulsion was directed towards the control of the working classes and reinforced by complaints that attendance officers paid less attention to middle-class areas and did not challenge better-off parents whose children were not at school.<sup>293</sup> There were occasional mistakes by attendance officers in differentiating between truants and children of the middle classes being educated at home, soon remedied by an apology from the attendance committee once the social status of the parent was evident.<sup>294</sup> Such errors by attendance officers were rare and show that to contemporaries, social status was hardly ever ambivalent in terms of appearance, manner and the neighbourhood in which one lived. The regular appearance of the attendance officer in working-class neighbourhoods gave the impression that supervision of children’s schooling was a form of policing of the working-class family.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> BradSB *Triennial Reports* 1897.

<sup>291</sup> KSB *Triennial Reports* 1899-1902.

<sup>292</sup> *Elementary Education Act, 1870*, Section 17.

<sup>293</sup> YSAC *Mins.* 26.5.1888.

<sup>294</sup> ThSAC *Mins.* 5.12.1895.

<sup>295</sup> Rubinstein, *School Attendance*, p.46.

The contacts between the enforcement authorities and the working-class population took place on two levels – the informal contacts in their neighbourhood or home, and the formal ones in the attendance meeting or court. Garland has shown that by the end of the nineteenth century, surveillance and monitoring of the working-class family was being undertaken by a bewildering variety of voluntary, charity and official bodies.<sup>296</sup> Of all these, the activities of the school attendance office were the most pervasive and widespread, especially in urban areas. Earlier in the century, an application for poor relief had been the most significant personal contact between the poor and officialdom and opened the door to the most intrusive of interventions into family circumstances. However, this covered only a self-selected group of the needy; most working-class families avoided contact with the poor law authorities if they could. Surveillance by the school attendance authorities was less intrusive but information was gathered on all working-class families in a district. The 1870 Act has been called ‘a dramatic extension of government involvement in the lives of a great many of the common people’, yet it was the systematic surveillance of working-class families from the 1880s onwards which made this ‘involvement’ a reality on the doorstep, in the person of the attendance officer.<sup>297</sup> Gardner refers to the incremental inculcation of the habit of schooling, ‘the result of thousands of unmarked daily confrontations between parents, teachers, children, policemen and school attendance officers at street corners, front doors and school gates.’<sup>298</sup> The recording of family circumstances became more formalised over time as the powers of local authorities in relation to schooling increased, for instance in the provision of education for disabled children in the 1890s.<sup>299</sup>

School attendance officers presented a different social profile to that of the attendance committee – that of lower middle or upper working-class respectability. At first, some local authorities hoped that attendance visits could be undertaken by middle-class ladies in the spirit of friendly advice but this did not last in the face of sometimes violent

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<sup>296</sup> David Garland, *Punishment and Welfare* (Aldershot: Gower, 1985), p.251.

<sup>297</sup> Harling, *Modern British State*, p.110.

<sup>298</sup> Philip Gardner, "Literacy, Learning and Education", in Chris Williams (ed.), *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p.364.

<sup>299</sup> See Appendix A, page 280 below.

opposition from parents.<sup>300</sup> Attendance officers' approach to the task of enforcement was usually more pragmatic than idealistic. Many came from service backgrounds in the military or police force, which was seen as an advantage as they could assert a natural authority at the working-class front door. As the memoirs of John Reeve showed, attendance officers could sympathise with their communities as well as judge them, and they often lived in the districts they 'policed'.<sup>301</sup> This was bringing the process of challenge and change into the familiar territory of the working-class family. The board school may at first have been a symbol of an 'alien' authority but the persistence of attendance officers and their 'participation' in the daily life and tribulations of the local neighbourhood over time created a grudging acceptance – enough for them to be lampooned as popular hate-figures in the manner of modern-day traffic wardens. The image of the attendance officer appears in popular folklore as a mixture of feared policeman to be avoided at all costs and pilloried stooge of the wily working-class child able to slip cannily out of his grasp.<sup>302</sup> In reality, local authorities knew that their attendance officers needed to combine tact and persuasion with sober authority more than anything else, given the relative weakness of the sanctions available. The Leeds School Board advised its officers, 'it will be clear ... that their duties are of an important and delicate nature.... [they] should be at all times sober, active, good-tempered and civil. Any roughness will raise up opposition in the people with whom they have to deal, and will render the due discharge of their duties almost impossible... In proportion to the intelligence, accuracy, forbearance, and tact displayed will their success be estimated by the Board.'<sup>303</sup> They knew that intervention in what were perceived as parental rights over their children needed careful handling – thus attendance officers were warned not to approach parents in public houses.

The more formal meetings of attendance committees and school boards dealt with a minority of parents who had not heeded the warning notices about regular attendance. They provided an opportunity for middle-class members to exert the authority of their

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<sup>300</sup> Rubinstein, *School Attendance*, p.51.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, p.44-5; Horn (ed.), *Diaries of George Dew*, pp.1-11.

<sup>302</sup> See pp. 243-4 for a series of cartoons published in *The School Attendance Gazette*, June-Sept. 1902.

<sup>303</sup> *LSB Year Books* 1901.

class over parents, but even here, the attitudes of the working classes were not always deferential. Interaction between the working-class community and the local authority was partly conditioned by prior expectations and experiences in other contexts, for instance applying to the Poor Law guardians for relief. The intermingling of roles must have coloured middle-class members' views of poorer parents and children. In York, where the attendance committee was formed by the elected councillors, not the local guardians, there was sensitivity to this issue and a deliberate policy to ensure that contacts with parents, for instance over the subsidising of fees from poor law funds, were not associated with the local guardians or workhouse premises.<sup>304</sup> The sheer quantity of meetings between middle-class members and working-class men and women (mostly mothers attended) provided a new forum for formal interaction between the classes. Although middle-class members exerted what they saw as their moral and legal authority to compel school attendance, both sides knew that the sanctions available were limited in range, expensive to institute and sometimes ineffectual. And where the bulk of the working-class population was ambivalent about regular attendance, a forceful approach could be counterproductive, as the Keighley School Board recognised in this statement, 'it is the invariable custom to allow every opportunity to negligent parents of attending and offering any excuse in defence of their conduct. The Committee never sanction any prosecutions except in cases where all persuasive means have failed.'<sup>305</sup>

The views of parents and children involved in truancy are, for obvious reasons, extremely rarely found in the historical record. The minutes of school attendance committees occasionally bring to life the unequal class relationships played out in interviews with parents.

Cherwell School – Sarah Lock, wife of William Lock, promised that her two children should attend in school in future every day except Thursday. She was told there was no power to allow any exception.

South Banbury – Caroline Taplin, whose husband has been transported, said she could not send her children to school on account of not being able to provide them with shoes... Mr Johnson offered to provide shoes for two of the children, Mr Barford for one child. Mrs Taplin promised that the children should be sent to school...

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<sup>304</sup> YSAC *Mins.* Sept.-Dec. 1877.

<sup>305</sup> KSB *Triennial Reports* 1878-81.

Hannah Castle, wife of Alban Castle, is obliged to take Thomas with her to harvest as she could not leave him at home. Her children were now attending school. She promised they should attend regularly.<sup>306</sup>

However, neither the specific excuses nor the manner of their reporting provide the full story behind the truancy of the children concerned. Some parents were well aware what was expected in these interviews and could tailor their explanations and excuses to suit the deferential tone required to avoid a summons to the magistrate's court, for instance, Mrs R of Banbury, 'who said she should be quite willing to send her children to school if she could get a school to take them,' or Mrs H who was eager to point the finger at a worse offender to deflect the committee's attention from her own son's summer work on the canal boats of north Oxfordshire.<sup>307</sup>

The attitudes of the working classes at meetings of attendance committees varied from a straightforward apology and promise to get the child to school to a robust defence of the reasons for their children's absence. But the official record can hardly be taken as a wholly accurate reflection of what was really felt behind the words uttered. For instance, the minutes of the York School Attendance Committee record ritualistically the thanks offered by parents who had been granted subsidies from the guardians because they could not afford school fees. In fact, headteachers sometimes complained that the money failed to reach school, which suggests that for some parents, deference was just the price to be paid for a bit of extra money in the family budget.<sup>308</sup> Some understated their wages to get fee remission and the practice was common enough for the Leeds School Board to produce a handbill for parents warning them of penalties for falsification of wages.<sup>309</sup> Others pleaded that their children were out of control, or that schools were too choosy to take them.<sup>310</sup> They were often 'active negotiators' over the terms of an agreed temporary absence or early leaving request.<sup>311</sup> A request made for a child to have a temporary absence from school was often agreed if the reasons conformed to middle-class

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<sup>306</sup> BaSAC *Mins.* 13.9.1878.

<sup>307</sup> Belfiore, "Family Strategies", p.341, BaSAC *Mins.* 22.11.1878, 16.11.1880.

<sup>308</sup> Belfiore, "Family Strategies", p.341; YSAC *Mins.* 8.1.1884.

<sup>309</sup> LSBAC *Leeds Attendance Committee* 24.1.1879, 6.2.1879; Huddersfield School Board School Attendance and Bye Laws Committee HuSAC *Minutes* 29.10.1883.

<sup>310</sup> E.g. BaSAC *Mins.* 6.5.1890; KSB *Attendance Cttee* 4.6.1878.

<sup>311</sup> Belfiore, "Family Strategies", p.372.

expectations of family responsibilities, for instance the support of a sick mother or father. There were limits, however, to the sympathies of middle-class committee members, as Mr Hopkinson of Huddersfield found when he turned up ‘intoxicated’ to ask for remission of fees.<sup>312</sup> If a job opportunity came up, parents and even schools would sometimes ignore the requirement to get permission because the child had not reached the required age or standard to start work.<sup>313</sup> Some parents simply ignored the summons to appear and explain their child’s absence from school and despite the imposition of attendance orders and fines, it was possible for them to continue to ignore the authorities for a considerable period of time.<sup>314</sup>

What effects did all this activity have on class relations and on changing perceptions of the problem of truancy? Although boards and attendance committees dealt with so many cases, such meetings became little more than a weekly ritual, repeated truancy or persistent high levels of absenteeism provoked the most reflection by members. The excuses given by parents excited sympathy, moralising or cynicism, but exposure to the actual facts of working-class poverty through the assessment of fee remission cases or their meetings with parents could also stir up an appreciation of the wider social and economic problems in the local community and their impact on families.<sup>315</sup> Truancy brought to the attention of the committee members not only the problems of poverty and distress which afflicted most working-class families from time to time, but the realities of some children’s lives – the Keighley boy staying out all night for fear of his father’s ‘brutal treatment’, the Banbury girl kept home to mind her ‘idiot’ brother or the young girls working as prostitutes in Bradford.<sup>316</sup> Their enquiries also brought to light children without families, without homes or in danger of neglect. These circumstances had been outside the purview of schools before the 1880s, as such children had never attended school, but compulsory attendance, and in particular the recording of children’s existence

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<sup>312</sup> HuSAC *Minutes* 28.2.1887.

<sup>313</sup> BradSBAC *Minutes* 1.5.1883, 16.10.1883, 20.11.1883.

<sup>314</sup> BuSAC *Bucks Minutes* case of James Franklin of Radclive 24.12.1896-14.4.1900; BiSAC *Mins.* case of George Pollard of Bicester 14.4.1892-3.1.1896.

<sup>315</sup> YSAC *Mins.* 29.4.1878, 10.12.1878, 11.9.1879 (Quarterly Report 10.11.1879); BradSB *Triennial Reports* 1886-8.

<sup>316</sup> KSB *Attendance Cttee* 28.5.1884, 22.2.1878 (case 4), 4.6.1878 (case 6); BaSAC *Mins.* 12.4.1878; BradSBAC *Minutes* 19.6.1883.

street by street, brought them to the attention of the authorities. A meeting with the school attendance committee was an experience from which working-class families were supposed to learn new habits and norms, but it was also a learning experience for some of the middle classes involved because 'the need to enforce attendance provoked intense concern and ultimately it proved impossible to sustain a rigid distinction between education and broader social problems, including the means to relieve poverty and distress.'<sup>317</sup>

### **Children at risk – 'dangerous truants'**

One of the clearest demonstrations of the way in which attendance enforcement prompted increasing concern about social problems was the rise in the numbers of children committed to residential correctional institutions for truancy. These children fall into two broad groups although one cannot distinguish sharply between them. The first group comprises those school children, mainly boys, who were known as 'recalcitrant truants' – persistent in absenting themselves to the point at which the attendance committee members considered them 'beyond control'. Such boys were often sent to dedicated truant schools, which had been established by the larger school boards to give the children in them a short 'shock treatment' of discipline before returning them, hopefully chastened, to the normal elementary school. The second group of children were truants without adequate homes, neglected or abused or in moral danger and as such were in need of long term care. This was usually provided by a residential industrial school, many of which had been established on a private basis since the middle of the nineteenth century to rescue children at risk of becoming delinquent.

Rural local authorities very rarely committed wayward boys to residential truant or industrial schools, chiefly because of the costs of maintenance. Although approximately half of the cost was borne by the Treasury, and parents were expected to contribute, local authorities were responsible for the rest and often the parental contribution was not paid. In urban authorities, attitudes towards truant schools varied. Although metropolitan

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<sup>317</sup> Martin, *Women and Schooling*, p.4.

authorities built their own truant schools and used them successfully, smaller urban local authorities and even cities like Bradford which did not have its own truant school tended to make more use of industrial schools.<sup>318</sup> The York Attendance Committee, despite sending 22 boys to truant schools during the previous 5 years, made a clear statement of preference for industrial schools when reviewing their policy in 1882.

First of all, the boys seemed less happy in the [truant school] than in the [industrial school] ... The law is hard and fast. It makes no allowances for difference of constitution. It does not admit of a small percentage of children to whom book learning is as nauseous as an emetic to a healthy man. The remedy applied is first of all solitary confinement. Then the boy ... is brought into the school; a task is set ... and if not learnt within a fixed time he is birched, and in spite of this harsh treatment thirty percent of the boys come back. This can scarcely be called success. In the industrial schools it is not so. If one class of work is distasteful, the boys are instructed in other branches and in the York school we found a boy a great favourite with the Masters docile, intelligent and obedient to whom the 3 Rs are a stumbling block. This boy at a Truant School would have undergone a great amount of needless punishment.<sup>319</sup>

This comment reflects both tolerance and understanding on the part of the committee members towards the children in their care, though industrial schools varied greatly in their facilities and regime.<sup>320</sup> It also suggests that a proportion of children resident in industrial schools had difficulty coping with the elementary school curriculum and this was the cause of their absenteeism and later removal to an industrial school. Industrial schools were increasingly used as a solution for children without homes or families, whose truancy arose more from the inadequacies of their care than any incipient delinquency.<sup>321</sup> The case of Thomas Galtriss of York illustrates the way in which truancy led to court then committal to an industrial school even where there was no question of misconduct by the child. In 1878, Thomas aged 9, and his widowed mother, Jane Galtriss, were living in one room in the 'red light' Water Lanes district of the city with another woman and her 3 children. The Medical Officer of Health paid a surprise visit at 10.30pm at night on account of the sudden death of a third woman with whom Mrs Galtriss had worked in a laundry. He reported on the conditions in which they were

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<sup>318</sup> Rubinstein, *School Attendance*, pp.53-5.

<sup>319</sup> YSAC *Mins.* 25.9.1882.

<sup>320</sup> Gillian C. Gear, "Industrial Schools in Great Britain, 1857-1933: 'Moral Hospitals' or 'Oppressive Institutions'" (unpublished PhD thesis, London Institute of Education, 1999), pp.137-40.

<sup>321</sup> BradSBAC *Minutes* 10.12.1878.

living. Their furniture consisted of 2 beds. The rent was only 1s 6d per week and the room was accessed via an external staircase – it had ‘abundant ventilation whether the inmates (sic) like it or not’ – but Thomas was not in moral danger. The MOH reported to the Urban Sanitary Committee that ‘Mrs Galtriss has all the appearance of a decent and respectable woman.’ However, he also condemned the premises as unfit for human habitation and urged the Committee to pull them down at ‘the earliest opportunity’.<sup>322</sup> One month later, Thomas was one of the first truants referred by the Attendance Committee to the York magistrates for committal to an industrial school to the age of 16.<sup>323</sup>

In all urban contexts, a high priority was given to dealing with truants whose non-attendance was attributed to moral or physical danger or where the family could not provide properly for the child. Partly this was due to campaigns by the NSPCC and many local charities devoted to ‘rescuing’ children at risk.<sup>324</sup> Margaret May has argued that the enforcement of compulsory attendance increased the likelihood of intervention as the legal obligation to educate such children could not be met within the disciplinary regime of the normal elementary school – either because they were too dirty or too badly-behaved.<sup>325</sup> But the vulnerability of the neglected child also carried within it the potential for danger – to other children and to society as a whole.<sup>326</sup> For this reason, members of attendance committees and school boards made assessments of the homes of children they suspected of living in ‘evil surroundings’ and deliberately removed them as far from their home and family as possible, a policy which many school managers supported.<sup>327</sup> In York, for instance, the enthusiasm for such activity led to high costs – at any one time in the 1880s, the Attendance Committee maintained more than 100 children in residential industrial schools all over the North and Midlands, eventually sending boys as far as Walthamstow, the two such schools in York itself being full. The problem of children

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<sup>322</sup> *York Herald* 23.6.1878.

<sup>323</sup> *YSAC Mins.* 8.7.1878.

<sup>324</sup> Behlmer, *Child Abuse*, pp.87-8.

<sup>325</sup> Margaret May, "Innocence and Experience: The Evolution of the Concept of Juvenile Delinquency in the Mid-Nineteenth Century", in G. Esland R. Dale, R. Fergusson and M. MacDonald (eds.), *Politics, Patriarchy and Practice* (Lewes: The Falmer Press in association with the Open University, 1981), p.280.

<sup>326</sup> Hendrick, *Child Welfare*, p.8

<sup>327</sup> *YSAC Mins.* 3.8.1885.

living in brothels had also been noted by one of the York Attendance Officers in 1882 and subsequently the Committee referred several cases to court in order to remove the children, although they came under criticism from the York Association for the Care of Young Girls for not acting swiftly enough to support their 'preventive work' in the case of an 11 year old girl, Nellie Wimbles.<sup>328</sup> In Bradford, school board members expressed concerns about girls of school age known to be truanting and involved in prostitution, 'in view of the contaminating influence that such girls cannot fail to exercise upon the children of respectable parents'.<sup>329</sup> For much of this 'rescue' activity, school boards and attendance committees relied on voluntary organisations to supply information and practical support. Usually children were consigned to an industrial school for several years up to the age of 14 or even 16 and local authorities often ensured that when they left the school, a job was found near the school rather than back in their home town.<sup>330</sup> Many children lost touch with their families, although some of the children from York asked after their homes and parents when attendance committee members visited them.<sup>331</sup>

Though most industrial schools were privately owned, several metropolitan school boards also took advantage of their greater available resources to set up a total of 18 new residential correctional schools between 1876 and 1902, whether as dedicated 'truant schools' or more general-purpose industrial schools.<sup>332</sup> Sutherland has called industrial and truant schools 'essentially penal institutions' and by 1900, there were more than 200 altogether, plus 4 training ships, under the supervision of the Home Office.<sup>333</sup> The 1876 Elementary Education Act included two sections (11 and 12) under which persistent truants could be committed to an industrial school, effective only once an attendance order had been breached, or if parental neglect could be proved. In fact, it was rare for children to be sent away if the local authority considered the problem was simply a

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<sup>328</sup> Ibid. 13.3.1882; 22.5.1882; 27.7.1885.

<sup>329</sup> BradSBAC *Minutes* 19.6.1883. They were enlightened enough to suggest that the men who patronized the brothels concerned should be prosecuted equally with the prostitutes they visited.

<sup>330</sup> Gear, "Industrial Schools", pp.111, 188; YSAC *Mins.* 28.4.1884 girls 'rescued' from bad company at home.

<sup>331</sup> Hastings Borough Council Education Committee HaECSAC *School Attendance Sub-Committee Minutes Vols. 1-3* 21.9.1908; YSAC *Mins.* Quarterly Report 9.11.1886.

<sup>332</sup> Gear, "Industrial Schools", p.55.

<sup>333</sup> Sutherland, *Policy-Making*, p.135; John S. Hurt, "Reformatory and Industrial Schools before 1933", *History of Education* 13, no. 1 (March 1984), p.50.

reluctance to attend school, especially if the home appeared adequate and respectable. Boys who had been spotted in the 'wrong company' or on the fringes of illegal activity were seen to be in need of a disciplinary regime which some parents, especially lone mothers, could not supply. Three times as many boys were committed to industrial schools than girls, and a proportion of the girls committed were taken from brothels.<sup>334</sup> This reflected the belief that girls were not at such risk of delinquency when they truanted, nor was it thought appropriate to house them in large institutions. In line with contemporary assumptions about the need for a 'domestic' environment, girls' industrial schools tended to be small-scale.<sup>335</sup>

The numbers of children committed to correctional institutions rose from the 1860s onwards, continuing to increase into the twentieth century. Partly this reflected an increase in the relevant age group within the population, but it was also due to the activities of school boards and attendance committees, particularly in urban areas.<sup>336</sup> But there were great variations in the committal rates of different urban local authorities. The committal rate in York was much higher than in Oxford for instance, where the day industrial school proved to be a cheaper local deterrent which could be used for a bigger group of children. The York School Attendance Committee had fewer resources than the School Board in Oxford but also fewer alternative measures to hand for dealing with persistent truancy. They could not afford to establish a day industrial school and were also highly committed to the 'rescue and reform' of truanting children.<sup>337</sup>

Whilst believing that life in an institution was a suitable alternative to some children's home circumstances, many committees scrutinised the industrial schools they patronised, paying regular visits to check on the health and welfare of the children for whom they were responsible.<sup>338</sup> Their reports show a faith in the regime to build character and train

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<sup>334</sup> Gear, "Industrial Schools", p.59.

<sup>335</sup> e.g. YSAC *Mins.* 18/19.7.1881 refers to Leeds Girls' (industrial) School where the 'comforts of a home are successfully combined with the duties of a school'.

<sup>336</sup> Hurt, "Industrial Schools," p.47; Gear, "Industrial Schools", pp.54-7.

<sup>337</sup> YSAC *Mins.* 25.9.1882 Report on visits to industrial and truant schools.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.* 18/19.7.2882 notes 'the apparent health and happiness of the children' at industrial schools visited by members of the Attendance Committee.

children, yet they were willing to take children's complaints seriously.<sup>339</sup> At a national level, concerns were expressed about the effectiveness of truant schools in particular, since it was known that children were often sent again and again – and there were several scandals involving excessive discipline or lack of adequate feeding in industrial schools.<sup>340</sup>

Although committals for truancy began to decline in the final years of the nineteenth century, one important result of the use of residential institutions as a response to truancy was its effect on the role of the enforcement authorities – it drew them into a field of official activity which had been the preserve of charities or the police. The committal of children to institutions was predicated on 'prevention' once truancy indicated problems in the child's home or character. By the end of the century, the enforcement of school attendance had begun to establish, as a sort of by-product, a new role for school authorities in the wider care of neglected or abused children.

## Conclusions

What general conclusions can be drawn about the control of truancy and the effects of enforcement on attitudes towards working-class families?

Firstly, local context, especially the child labour market in the locality, was a crucial influence on the way in which attendance was enforced. This was most clearly demonstrated by the problems faced by the School Board in Bradford and its at times ambivalent attitude to enforcement in relation to school leaving ages. Attendance in the textile districts where half-time and early leaving were institutionalised within a legal framework of their own (the Factory Acts) resulted in lower attendance rates than for rural areas, where child labour was seasonal and casual and could, to some extent be accommodated within the permitted holiday times. In the big cities, casual work for

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid. 7.6.1887, 25.7.1887- inquiry into complaints by York boys at the Hightown Truant School, Liverpool.

<sup>340</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1896, Report of the Departmental Committee on Reformatory and Industrial Schools*, xlv (8204), Vol.1, p.23; *YSAC Mins.* 25.9.1882.

adults, constant inward and outward migration and a greater concentration of households on the cusp of extreme poverty in particular districts contributed to serious problems of enforcement, since there were no community ‘sanctions’ for non-attendance. These sorts of conditions combined with the child labour issues in Bradford to produce a widespread antipathy to those enforcing school attendance in parts of the city. In rural areas, schools were less likely to be differentiated according to a social hierarchy and the pressures of clergy and teacher in the agricultural community helped to reinforce school attendance whatever the family circumstances, even though the ‘pull’ of work and family poverty were great. Rural communities had stable or declining populations and the informal pressure of community expectation provided an additional incentive to send children to school. However, in all areas, where the child labour market declined naturally or was limited by law, school attendance improved, as the Buckinghamshire evidence shows.

Secondly, urban authorities had more resources to fight the battle against non-attendance, which meant they could employ a wider range of sanctions. However, they were also faced with more diverse problems – including transient populations and what were called ‘capricious removals’ of children from one school to another to avoid the authorities and to avoid paying arrears of fees. It seems that in rural areas, the enforcement regime was much ‘softer’. However, gradually it did have an effect, alongside the allowances for seasonal work and early leaving, which made schooling more acceptable in the farming community.

Thirdly, all local authorities had to make concessions to parental needs and local socio-economic circumstances – for instance, even the Oxford School Board recognised that they could not put an end to all early leaving or refuse half-time certificates, though they tried to restrict access to them by having high exemption standards.

Finally, Government assisted the gradual improvement in attendance when it standardised the minimum school leaving ages, to 11 in 1893 and 12 in 1900. Both of these changes were opposed in Bradford and in many rural areas. However, the whittling

down of the child labour market over time in most urban areas meant these were isolated protests.

The role of enforcement in improving school attendance has been minimised by some historians and recognised as important by others. The evidence here is that it could make a difference, even in the most unpropitious of circumstances, as the example of Bradford shows. But the evidence also shows that the enforcement of school attendance led to an expansion of the state's role, including increased surveillance of working-class communities by local government. This brought with it more awareness of the problems facing those communities, but legal and attitudinal obstacles remained in the way of action to remedy these on a practical level. Nonetheless, the enforcement of school attendance was significant in providing the seedbed for a future child welfare role by local authorities. The absences of children which were obviously due to health deficiencies, poor nutrition and in a minority of cases the neglect and abandonment of children, eventually led to a tentative but essentially positive view of the need for state intervention to deal with the root causes of absenteeism from school.

The process of change in school attendance has been analysed from the point of view of the enforcement agencies, but working-class families were not passive players in it as the section 'Truancy and School Attendance – a pinch-point of class relations', has shown. The majority seem to have conformed to the levels of attendance expected but prosecutions were still rising until the mid-1890s. This shows that for nearly two decades after compulsion, there was a persistent minority of families whose children did not attend school regularly. Questions arise as to who those families were and why they continued to resist the law. Were these truants just from the very poorest families with the greatest need for a child's income? Was there a particularly type of family which resisted education or did not value it – or was truancy just an endemic feature of working-class family life, becoming less common over time, but nonetheless an accepted but occasional practice to suit family needs? As truancy declined over time, was there a change in the social profile of the families involved, indicating a change in the social acceptability of

truancy? In the following chapter, a detailed case study attempts to examine these questions.

#### Chapter 4: Families in the Firing Line – Prosecutions for Truancy in Coventry 1874-99

**‘The majority of these cases concern habitual offenders, who allow their children to become familiar with practices which contaminate other children, and, if allowed to escape notice, would inevitably produce pests to society.’<sup>341</sup>**

Two approaches are commonly used by historians in dealing with the question of school attendance. One is to examine changes in the law and the gradually-developing efficiency of the policing authorities at the time.<sup>342</sup> The other is to place truancy within a particular socio-economic context and explain its decline as a gradual absorption of new social expectations into family life, with some resistance related to the issue of child labour, particularly in rural areas and the textile districts of northern England.<sup>343</sup> The latter approach is necessarily more speculative, given the type of evidence available. In this chapter, a local case study of Coventry, ‘official’ sources have been cross-referenced in an attempt to understand not only what the authorities were doing, but the ways in which families responded to the pressures to conform to the law’s requirement.

In the years immediately following the implementation of compulsion, one might expect a lag in conformity with quite a wide range of working-class parents falling foul of the new bye-laws. There is no doubt that, especially in the 1870s and 80s, much of the non-attendance was attributable in part at least to family poverty. Belfiore, in her study of school attendance in three Essex towns, highlights a critical stage of family formation when the children were numerous but not yet able to contribute to family income sufficiently as presenting the highest risk of non-attendance, often by the ‘middle’ child.<sup>344</sup> By the mid-1880s, however, most urban working-class children attended school regularly. Even in the poorest districts of the cities and in the towns of the North where child employment opportunities were abundant, the majority of parents and children

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<sup>341</sup> KSB *Triennial Reports* Report for 1884-87.

<sup>342</sup> Sutherland, *Policy-Making*, chaps. 4 & 5; Mitch, *Rise of Popular Literacy*, chaps. 6 & 7; Behlmer, *Friends of the Family*, pp.92-103.

<sup>343</sup> Rubinstein, *School Attendance*, pp.56-89; Horn, *Rural England*, pp.138-41, 266-71, Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, pp.188-213.

<sup>344</sup> Belfiore, "Family Strategies", p.277.

conformed to the law, at least at a level to satisfy the authorities. Yet the records of local authorities show that absenteeism continued to cause considerable concern both to schools and to those responsible for improving attendance. They expressed frustration at the limited impact which sanctions appeared to have on the behaviour of parents and children who continued to truant. This was not a negligible number as prosecutions for non-attendance remained close to 90,000 per year until the 1890s and for every case which reached court, at least two had received notices of summons and many more had been visited or received warning letters.<sup>345</sup>

Why did some children persist in absenting themselves when the habit of regular attendance was becoming established and did they differ in some way from those who attended regularly? Even though the correlation with poverty is an obvious one, there must have been other factors which influenced those families, particularly those whose children repeatedly played truant from school. In the following case study of Coventry, the specific socio-economic conditions relating to particular families and their neighbourhoods have been analysed to produce a more detailed picture of the type of family involved in truanting behaviour in the 1870s, 80s and 90s. The aim is to illuminate the process by which working-class families adopted the habit of regular school attendance in the decades following compulsion.

## Sources

The main source which has provided detailed information for a sample of truanting children is the Coventry Summons Book, a handwritten record over 80 pages long covering all prosecutions for truancy in the magistrates' court of Coventry between 1874 and 1899. It is a rare, possibly unique, source covering nineteenth-century truancy, though there may be others in local archives, which are not recorded on the Access to

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<sup>345</sup> The proportion of earlier stage cautions to eventual prosecutions varied greatly – in Oxford, from 10-25% of parents given notices of summons were taken to court in the 1880s, but in Bradford it was nearer 50% on average. However, the ratio of prosecutions to visits by an attendance officer was no more than 2-3%.

Archives catalogue.<sup>346</sup> Local authorities did not usually keep such thorough records of their prosecutions. It is unique compared with other institutional sources used in this thesis, since it records the individual cases of more than 3,000 families summoned to court for the non-attendance at school of one or more children between 1874 and 1899. In each case, the parent's name, address, name of child and his/her age plus the outcome were recorded. It was therefore possible to create a database of families and analyse the pattern of prosecution, the ages of the children involved and the incidence of different types of penalty. For some years, occupational data was recorded for the fathers, and it was also possible to determine the number of single female-headed households involved where mothers were prosecuted as the head of household. For a more limited sample of nearly 300 families within the Summons Book, a detailed social analysis of family circumstances was completed using the Summons Book to provide identifying data for those prosecuted in 1881 and 1891, to which was added data from the census of the same year. This enabled a process of 'family reconstruction', which it is not possible to perform for the twentieth century.<sup>347</sup> The 3,000 families were not a random sample of working-class families in Coventry as they had all been prosecuted for non-attendance, but how typical were they? Were they poorer than average, or from particular occupational groups or distinguished by other features? In order to try to answer this, an attempt has been made to place them within the socio-economic context of the town using general census information and secondary sources relating to Coventry from 1860-1900.

Local authorities did not institute proceedings without making preliminary enquiries via their school attendance officers, usually followed by written warnings and an interview with the attendance committee. Thus, the authority sought to avoid the expense of prosecution in all but recalcitrant cases. The 3,000 parents listed in the Summons Book had reached the end of that process – in some cases, the prosecution was withdrawn after adjournment as the child had started to attend again, but this did not invalidate the reason for the prosecution. It was therefore legitimate to include all of these cases as examples of

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<sup>346</sup> [www.a2a.org.uk](http://www.a2a.org.uk) (cited 5.4.2005).

<sup>347</sup> Due to the lack of detailed enumeration information available for censuses after 1901.

truancy, so the sample should be considered a good data source on persistent truants and their families in Coventry.

### **Analysis of the Coventry summons book**

There is no assumption that Coventry was typical of all urban contexts at the time, nor even of medium-sized industrial towns, though its high-density back-to-back housing was not uncommon, even in the Midlands and South of England.<sup>348</sup> To some extent, the pattern of non-attendance must have been influenced by local economic conditions and family arrangements. But these conditions influenced the household decisions of families and children in particular ways. For instance, the moderately high incidence of domestic or small workshop production which continued in Coventry almost to the end of the century was quite unusual and may have contributed to the demand for children to assist parents working at paid labour in the home or near it, as well as to perform household tasks.

Date	Coventry	York	Oxford
1877	71.36	64.02 (1878)	75.72 (1876)
1881	75.62	67.62	77.41
1882	76.67	71.40	79.87

Table A

Table A compares the recorded attendance rates for Coventry with those for Oxford and York, which were similar in size to Coventry. Oxford had a very effective school board operational from 1873, whereas York was late in establishing a school board and progress

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<sup>348</sup> Margaret Simons, "South of the Essex Bristol Line: Courts and Back-to-Back Housing in Mid-Nineteenth Century Reading", paper presented at *The Economic History Society Annual Conference* (University of Reading: 1 April 2006).

on attendance was slow. Coventry appears to fall between the two, but the trend for all three is the same, a steady upward climb in average attendance at school.<sup>349</sup>

Simon Szreter has shown that a multitude of local influences can result in similar decisions being taken by families in many different locations at broadly the same time.<sup>350</sup> The decision to truant cannot always be characterised as a ‘family’ decision, but it was one which arose out of a set of circumstances *within* a family and was susceptible to influences from the local context – such as the occupations of parents, their ability to supervise their children, their need for the child’s labour, income or time and the value they placed on the schooling provided. It is on this basis that the Coventry data has been analysed. First, the data was compiled in spreadsheets and then analysed to identify any significant patterns which emerge against the general economic circumstances of the town. Two smaller samples of parents in 1881 and 1891 were then followed up using census data as background information to explore the circumstances of particular families and test whether the decision not to attend school can be explained in relation to particular family structures, the incidence of working mothers or of particular occupational groups.

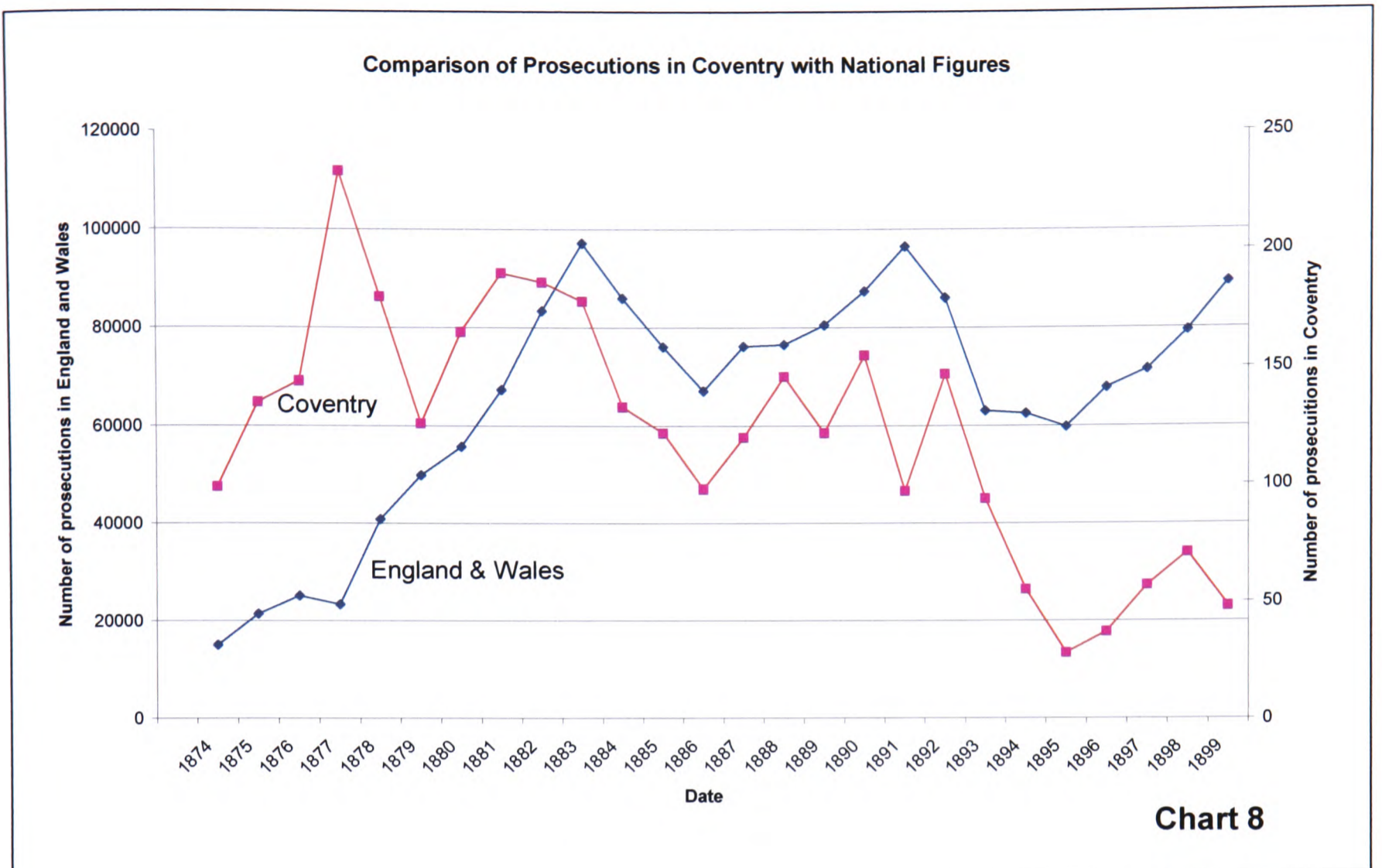
### **Coventry compared with national trends**

Chart 8 overleaf compares the trend of prosecutions in Coventry with that for the country as a whole. For the 1880s the average annual rate of prosecutions in Coventry was 1.8%, on the basis of a total school roll of nearly 8,000 which puts it lower than York’s and higher than Oxford’s, which were towns of roughly similar size. Unfortunately, the figures have not survived for sufficient years to test whether the rate of prosecution led to attendance improvements.

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<sup>349</sup> Attendance data for Coventry were not recorded systematically in the School Board records.

<sup>350</sup> Szreter, *Fertility*, p. 364.



Source: *Parliamentary Papers 1879-1938 Courts of Summary Jurisdiction Annual Figures for Number of Prosecutions under the Education Acts*; *Coventry School Board Register of Summonses for Non-Attendance, 1874-99*

Chart 8 shows that the trendline for prosecutions in Coventry followed much the same trajectory as the national one, but earlier, with a peak in the late 1870s, a plateau through the 1880s with some variation from year to year, then a steady decline after 1893, interrupted by a rise in 1898. If extended to 1909, the national trend shows the same falling away after a peak in 1900. The similarity of the trendlines might lead to a suggestion that prosecutions were guided, at least partly, by national policy.

Coventry School Board was set up in 1873, about the same time as Oxford's. Overcrowding was a constant problem in some of the city's schools for most of the 1880s, necessitating the building of new board schools.<sup>351</sup> However, the Board was obviously

<sup>351</sup> *CoSB Mins.* 6.1.1881, 28.6.1883, 5.2.1885, 8.9.1892.

organised enough to start enforcing its attendance bye-laws by the mid-1870s. It instituted a big push on attendance in 1878 and continued to maintain a slightly lower level of prosecutions throughout the 1880s. The prosecutions did not fall away immediately after the ending of school fees in 1891, but within two years they were declining rapidly. This may indicate that there had not been the expected increase in attendance of children from the poorest families, previously unable to pay fees, but that maintaining the prosecution rate did have an eventual effect on such parents. Unfortunately, there are no figures for average attendance for Coventry for these years to check whether there had been a significant rise in attendance after 1892 leading to a policy of reducing prosecutions.

Certainly, the pattern of prosecution responded to national trends and policies, such as the raising of the school leaving age and ending of fees. However, decisions to prosecute were largely at the behest of the local authority – there was very little interference by the Education Department, unless an authority neglected to prosecute entirely. It is likely therefore that the strategy of the Coventry School Board reflected their perception of the local problems involved in enforcing the law in particular districts of the city and the factors likely to affect local families.

### **Patterns of prosecution in Coventry 1874-99**

The Summons Book records only those parents who had ‘reached the end of the line’, so to speak, with the authorities. However, it is possible to gain some indication of the levels of ‘resistance’ to the new demand for regular school attendance from a different source in the Coventry archive, the School Attendance Officer’s Daily Report Book. Until 1883, Coventry School Board employed only 1 attendance officer, but it is not clear whether he chased up non-attenders from all elementary schools in the city or concentrated on those absent from the board schools only. The day books of the two new attendance officers appointed in 1883 and 1886 record similar levels of absence in households in the south and east of the city. Table B overleaf shows a sample of the cases recorded in one of the books. It is notable that non-attendance reduced very quickly, once the attendance officer

started his visits to homes. By 1876, there was a 'core' of children absent from school, which did not change significantly in number over the ensuing years.

Date	No. of Houses visited	Children aged 5-13	Absent sick	Cannot pay fees	Opposed to bye-laws	Total off School*
27/3/1873	676	581	35	44	134	233
9/3/1876	624	662	23	13	24	62
6/3/1879	579	604	31	17	16	64
1/3/1882	669	752	30	21	10	63
2/4/1885	495	514	25	9	6	43
1/3/1888	536	558	39	17	9	67

Table B

\* includes another category labelled 'other reasonable causes'

Table B suggests that most parents quickly accommodated the requirement to send their children to school, under the mild pressure of a visit from the attendance officer, leaving a relatively intransigent group of parents and children, whom the authorities were not able to shift by persuasion alone into compliance with regular attendance.

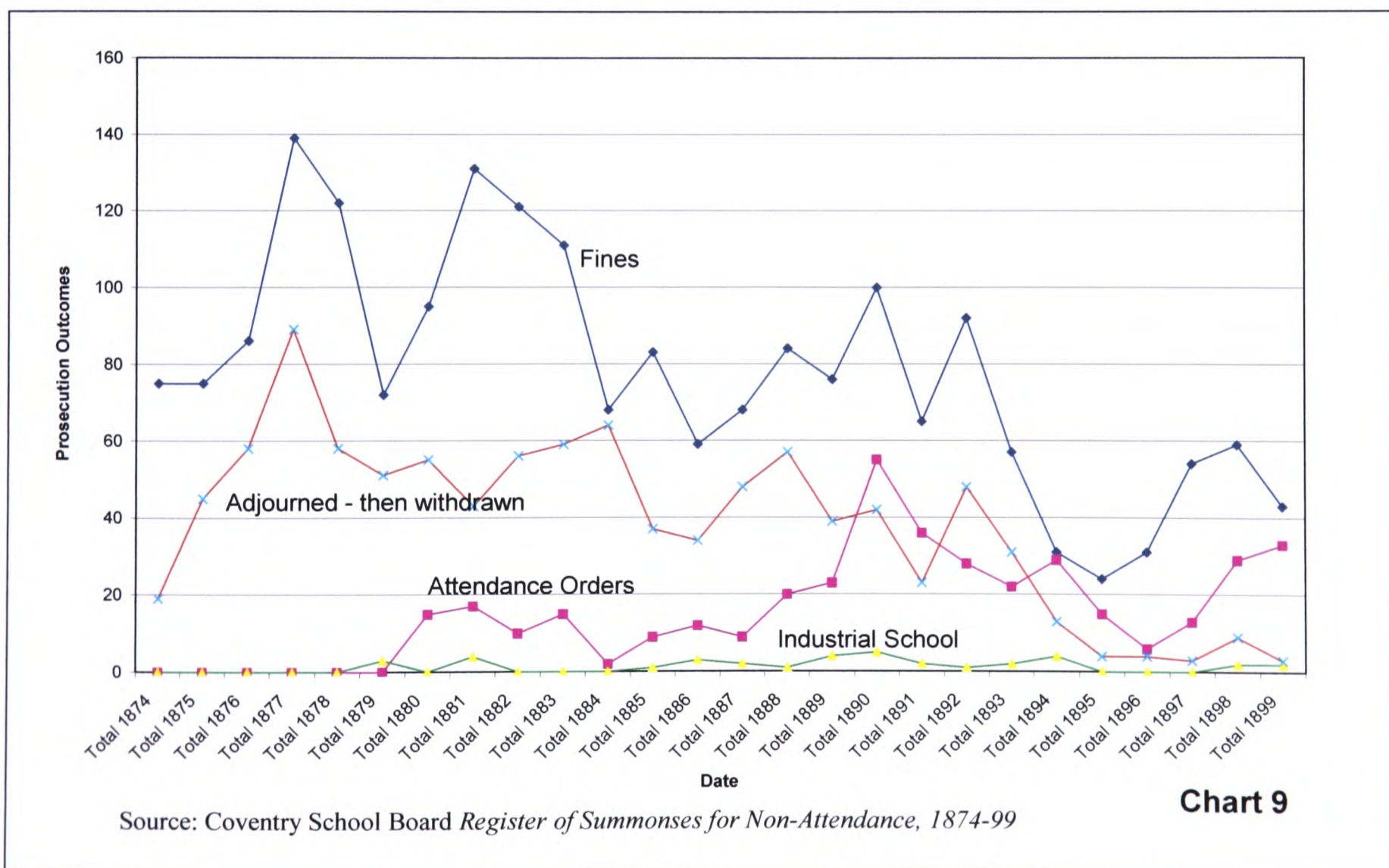


Chart 9 presents a profile of the outcomes of prosecutions in Coventry. A fine was the most common outcome, usually 1s plus costs making the total cost 5s, with little variation after 1874. This was not a great sum compared with the weekly earning capacity of an 11 year old child (there is no 'typical wage' but a useful example is that of George Carter aged 11 in York who was refused permission to leave school to earn a weekly wage of 4/6<sup>352</sup>). Indeed, the 5s fine was widely seen as a 'nuisance' rather than penalty for parents whose children could earn that amount in a week, whereas a typical prosecution would take 6 weeks to complete, and on top of that, there was the problem of fine collection.<sup>353</sup> In Coventry, given the location of most employment in small workshops, and the fact that 90% of workers were paid by time and not piece rates, it would cause very little inconvenience to fathers to attend court.<sup>354</sup>

The other main outcome was an adjournment, giving the parent a month or six weeks to comply with the attendance requirement. If attendance had improved, the case was withdrawn. Where the adjournment resulted in a fine, the case has been included in the fines category. Attendance orders were introduced in Coventry from 1880, as a result of prosecutions under the Education Acts rather than the bye-laws. These were an official order but in effect acted as a 'stay of execution' for the parent and if not complied with, the case returned to court for a fine, or sometimes committal of the child to an industrial school. However, committals of children to residential institutions were rare in Coventry – they were costly to the local taxpayer as collecting the parental contribution was difficult. Children committed to industrial schools included the three boys recorded in the Book as involved in the 'robbery at Spon St School' in December 1880. Children committed from Coventry went to the Gem Street Industrial School in Birmingham – none were sent to special truant schools.

The conviction rate in Coventry was never less than 50%. Adjournment and later withdrawal was treated as 'unconvicted' – although in fact, these cases meant improved

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<sup>352</sup> YSAC *Mins.* 13.2.1882.

<sup>353</sup> For many school boards, it was a constant battle to reduce fine arrears – some fines remained unpaid for years.

<sup>354</sup> Gilbert Lincoln Marson, "Coventry: A Study in Urban Geography" (unpublished MA thesis, University of Liverpool, 1949), p.64.

attendance had been demonstrated in the adjournment period, not that the original offence was unsubstantiated. The presentation of a medical certificate for a child was rare – fewer than half a dozen occur in the Summons Book. The conviction rate rose steeply from 1894 to reach 95% by 1897, as the Board concentrated on repeat offenders, the ‘hard core’ of parents whose children had frequently truanted. In these cases, an adjournment was less likely. From 1895 onwards, more than 80% of outcomes were fines, indicating that the magistrates believed an adjournment (in the hope of improved attendance) would have no effect on the parents they were seeing in court.

The Summons Book reveals a great deal about the characteristics of the families involved. These need to be understood in relation to the social and economic context of the town during the years 1874-99.

### **Neighbourhood and truanting**

Coventry was a largely working-class town and there were no significant middle-class districts to speak of. Its housing was distinctive in terms of its density and lack of facilities, even amongst nineteenth-century urban industrial centres.<sup>355</sup> Population density reached its peak at the turn of the century following the cycle boom of the mid-1890s – in the Gosford Street Ward, where many of the families in the truants’ sample lived, housing density was 17.2 per acre by 1901, compared with 4 per acre for the city as a whole.<sup>356</sup> Analysis of the addresses of those prosecuted illustrates as expected that there were concentrations of truants in very poor areas of the city. The survival of common rights on the outskirts of the city meant that building land was in short supply from the mid-nineteenth century. This led to a process of infill of the gardens and plots occupied by larger houses on the main streets by two-storey back-to-back houses and small factories, built in virtually enclosed courts accessed by a single narrow alleyway from the main road. This housing pattern produced self-contained ‘pockets’ of poverty behind better-off residences.

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<sup>355</sup> Bill Lancaster and Tony Mason (eds.), *Life and Labour in a Twentieth Century City: The Experience of Coventry* (Cryfield Press, University of Warwick, 1987), p.342.

<sup>356</sup> Marson, "Coventry: Urban Geography", p.187.

The lists for particular dates show that the authorities were engaging in ‘truancy blitz’ tactics, by taking virtually all of the parents in a particular yard or street to court at the same time. For instance, on 10 July 1880, all 12 respondents lived in courtyards behind Well Street and neighbouring Bond Street, two streets just to the north of the city centre. Of these 12, five were in court again in 1881 or 1882. Sometimes repeated ‘blitzes’ are featured in the record, for instance for Castle Street, situated in the crowded centre of the city, in February 1883 and then again in September 1884. The prosecution of poor ‘neighbourhoods’ was characteristic of the 1880s only – by the 1890s, the distribution of addresses was much wider across the city. The ‘blitz’ approach in the 1880s suggests the School Board was using prosecution at that time to send a firm message to parents in neighbourhoods where *most* children went to school irregularly, even if only a minority were frequent non-attenders. The reputations of particular districts, even of particular streets and courtyards, in terms of poverty and respectability, may well have informed the decision to focus on those areas, as much as information obtained from schools. The fine gradations of the working-class social scale were apparent not only to the authorities but to each neighbourhood’s occupants, even though its occupational make-up might be diverse.<sup>357</sup> At the same time, families were vulnerable to shifts in industrial conditions, and could fall into a lower echelon at any time, with its concomitant effects on the children as they became absorbed into the ‘habits’ of the district.<sup>358</sup> It seems that neighbourhood was a more significant determinant of the likelihood of a prosecution for truancy in the 1870-80s, indicating perhaps that the mores of the neighbourhood were a more powerful influence on a child’s and even a family’s behaviour than the breadwinner’s occupational status.

Of course, from the point of view of truanting children, Coventry was ideally suited to the avoidance of detection by school attendance officers, as they could keep out of sight in what was effectively a hidden world of back-to-back houses behind the main streets.

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<sup>357</sup> Catherine Sandler, "Working-Class Adolescents in Birmingham: A Study in Social Reform, 1900-1914" (unpublished DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford, 1987), pp.159-61. For this reason, both occupational and locational data are relevant to a judgement about the socio-economic background of truanting families.

<sup>358</sup> William Woodruff, *The Road to Nab End: A Lancashire Childhood* (London: Eland Press, 2000), pp.356-7.

The house numbering itself was imprecise and confusing, since up to a dozen houses were numbered from one on the street fronting the courtyard, and this led to more difficulties in tracking down truants and identifying addresses in court. For the frustrated authorities, a clamp-down from time to time might have seemed the best way to ‘send a message’ to certain districts that school attendance was going to be enforced.

### **Child labour and the age of truants**

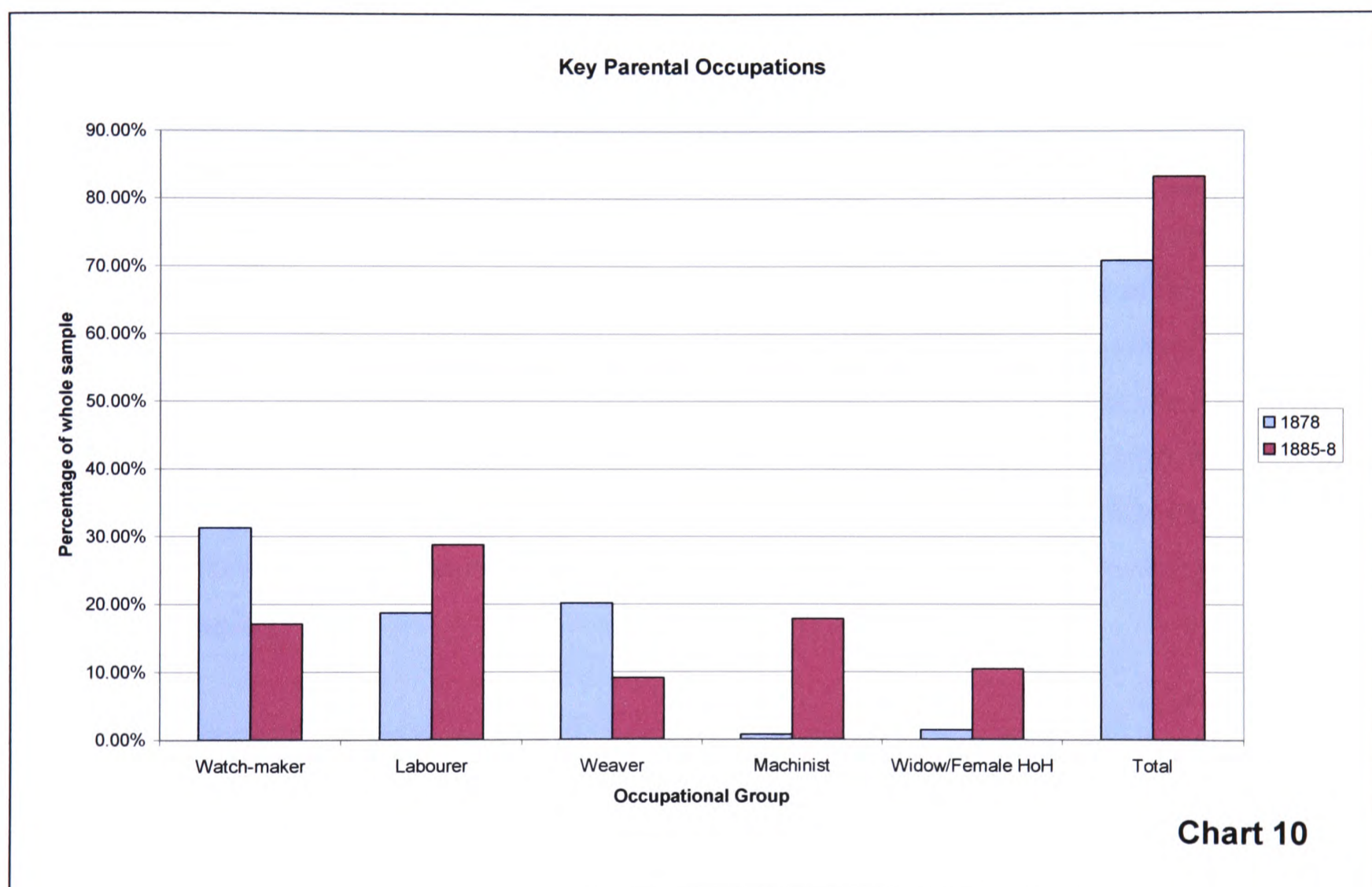
The truanting children listed ranged in age from 6 to 13, though 13 year olds only came into the reckoning after 1880. The very few six-year olds in the Summons Book were the siblings of older children also being prosecuted. The number of children aged 9 or under, however, was quite significant, forming 32% of all cases. It is very unlikely that a child of this age would have been in paid employment even in the 1870s, but certainly possible that parents kept them at home for domestic tasks or to assist in domestic production. Child labour, casual or paid, is a more plausible as an explanation for the 18% of truants aged 10 and the 22% aged 11, and even more so for the 23% aged 12 and the 6% aged 13. The proportions of truants of different ages remained fairly constant over the years recorded, although there was a trend towards the prosecution of older children, within the declining number of total prosecutions, in the later 1890s. The prosecutions of 12 and 13 year olds were often undertaken under Section 11 of the 1876 Education Act, rather than the bye-laws, as an official attendance order was then made, rather than an adjournment. Coventry had approximately 600 half-timers in school each year, which was higher than for York or Oxford and reflected opportunities for child labour in the local textile trades. There were ‘exemplary’ prosecutions of a group of employers in 1878 but this was exceptional. They were all small-scale employers, typical of Coventry businesses, with only one child under age employed in each case. Fines were much higher than for parents, but varied according to the court’s estimation of the employer’s resources.

There are no startling conclusions from this profile – the proportion of younger children in the sample is perhaps surprising and suggests that much absence from school was not

attributable to child labour, at least outside the home.<sup>359</sup> However, some of the absence of older children may have been due to the peculiar structure of Coventry's industrial base and the radical changes which had taken place there since the 1860s.

### Occupations and pressures on family incomes

Beyond their names and addresses, the data on parents is patchy, as occupations were only recorded in two sections of the Summons Book, part of 1878 and three years from 1885-8. These are compared in Chart 10.



Source: Coventry School Board *Register of Summonses for Non-Attendance, 1874-99*

The data for 1878 mentions 36 different occupations. This variety, including a newsagent, coal dealer, hairdresser and even a policeman, shows the wide social spread

<sup>359</sup> Hugh Cunningham, "The Employment and Unemployment of Children in England c.1680-1851", *Past & Present* 126 (1990), p.150.

of families involved in non-attendance in the 1870s. At this stage, truancy was already a minority activity, but certainly not socially-exclusive to the poor or marginal groups. However, three occupations account for 70% of prosecutions, reflecting the dominant trades in Coventry – silk ribbon weavers, watchmakers and general labourers. The inclusion of labourers is hardly surprising, since their employment was insecure, their wages lower than skilled workers and their children often needed to contribute to family incomes.

The silk ribbon weavers of Coventry were members of a declining trade, and an increasingly factory-based and feminised one. Between 1861 and 1871, Coventry's population had declined by over 8% as many weavers and their families emigrated, leaving vacant houses in the poorer parts of the city. By the 1880s, new weaving factories were replacing the domestic system, with elastic weaving and cotton thread and frillings, plus silk book-markers emerging, but by no means filling the gap in terms of employment capacity. Manufacturing was still largely concentrated in small workshops, some of them built especially on the top storey of terraces of workers' cottages, to enable weavers and their families to access steam-driven machinery for domestic production. Women were commonly involved in assisting the weaving, often as winders and warpers and children as fillers and pickers-up.<sup>360</sup> Possibly the weavers were using the labour of their children, as well as their wives, to sustain family incomes in a situation of increasing competition and low wages.

The prevalence of watchmakers, though in proportion to their numbers in the city, is slightly surprising, since they were skilled craftsmen. However, the industry in Coventry was characterised by an elaborate assembly process organised on an outworking system, with each worker concentrating on a single aspect of the production process.<sup>361</sup> This is clearly reflected in census evidence for 1881, where men were listed variously by enumerators as watch-case maker, escapement maker, watch-dial maker, balance-wheel maker, watch-jewel maker, and so on, as well as the coverall terms 'watchmaker' and

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<sup>360</sup> Marson, "Coventry: Urban Geography", pp.60-1.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid., p.67.

‘watch finisher’. The watch-making trade was certainly under threat by the 1870s, but it was not turning towards mechanised production as was the case with silk manufacture. Instead, the response of the industry had been to sub-divide the assembly process even more, producing a lot of intra-occupational variation in earnings and insecure employment. Some watchmakers lived in houses with extensive workshops attached to their homes. Traditionally, their wives almost never undertook paid labour, and family incomes should have been reasonable, even in what was a declining trade. However, the addresses of the watchmakers in the *Summons Book* did not lie in those homogeneous communities to the north and west of the city where the specialist workshops of the better-off watchmakers were located. These watchmakers lived in the central more mixed areas of the city, alongside labourers, silk weavers and others casually employed.<sup>362</sup> This means they were probably little more than journeymen, depending on an insecure supply of work from the master watchmakers’ workshops.

The data from the mid-1880s on occupations of parents of truants takes us into a new phase in Coventry’s industrial history, with the appearance of ‘machinists’ in significant numbers. Cycle assembly did not need sophisticated premises or machinery as most of the parts were made elsewhere, although major advances in bicycle design were made by the early-established firms, such as Starley’s Coventry Machinists Company, which had originally been set up to produce sewing machines, and diversified into cycles. Little capital was needed to set up a cycle factory, consequently the pattern of employment was similar in some ways to Coventry’s other trades, with numerous small employers, often transient ones, working in a boom and bust environment as orders for cycles fluctuated widely in the 1880s and 90s. This must have contributed to a relatively buoyant job market during the good times, with the disadvantage of fluctuating incomes for workers, long hours when orders were good and considerable insecurity of employment when orders fell away.<sup>363</sup> The work in sewing machines and cycles was well-paid assembly work, but insecure and seasonal due to fluctuating demand, so perhaps contributing to a

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<sup>362</sup> R.B. Pugh, *Victoria County History for Warwickshire*, vol. VIII, *Victoria County History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.171

<sup>363</sup> Marson, "Coventry: Urban Geography", p.78.

demand for child labour when the breadwinner's income was interrupted by a lack of work.<sup>364</sup>

The truant families for 1885-8 were concentrated in fewer occupations, but again the significant trades of Coventry are represented. Weavers form 20% of the sample of occupations of truants' parents in the Summons Book in 1878 but only 9% of it in 1885-8. This clearly follows the rapid decline of weaving in the 1870s - weavers are over-represented in the sample for 1878 but less so for the mid-1880s, when numbers had stabilised in the city and many had presumably left or found other work. One explanation for the higher levels of non-attendance by their children at the earlier date is that there was still a significant demand for child labour in small workshops in 1878, but this had declined somewhat by 1885-8. Nonetheless, weaving families are over-represented at both dates and this could be attributed both to endemic poverty, insecure employment and to the demand for child labour in domestic production.

The figures show that watchmakers formed 31.25% of the sample in the Summons Book in 1878, but only 17.7% by 1884-5. This trend, like the weavers, follows some decline of the trade, but watchmakers were only slightly over-represented in the sample for 1878 than their numbers in the working population as a whole. What is more interesting is that most of the watchmakers prosecuted lived in the centre of the town, and in the back-to-back courts rather than the purpose-built watch-makers' housing of Chapelfields, indicating that they were working on the fringes of the trade and likely to have interrupted or insecure income. In 1881, cycle manufacture was still tiny in Warwickshire, with only 583 men employed. This is also reflected in the truants' parents sample, with only 1 'machinist' listed for 1878, but they form nearly 18% of the 1885-8 sample, a larger proportion of the parents prosecuted than the weavers or watchmakers by this stage. By the 1891 census, the number of cycle workers in Coventry had reached 3854 or 20% of Coventry's male workforce. Given the rapid rise of the industry, it is possible that they are over-represented in the 1885-8 figures but there is no way to

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<sup>364</sup> Pugh, *Vict. County Hist.*, pp.172-4.

determine this as there was no figure for this type of work applying to Coventry alone in the 1881 census.

The more 'middle-class' occupations mentioned in 1878, such as hairdresser and newsagent, were absent in the mid-1880s sample, but parents with skilled trades are included. The distinguishing feature of them all, is that they lived in the same districts, streets and courts as those prosecuted in 1878 – it is the major common factor between the two samples – there are a few from the 1885-8 sample who lived out in the weavers' 'suburb' of Hillfields and some near the new cycle works to the west of the city, but most lived in the old central area, with its crowded back-to-back housing. Clearly the prosecuting pattern had not changed by this time, but the absence of the better-off parents perhaps indicates that the latter were now conforming to the attendance laws, whereas the poor of the central districts remained the main target of attention.

### **Single parent families and truancy**

Chart 10 also indicates the incidence of female headed households in the sample for 1878 and the mid-1880s. It is clear that prosecutions of widows increased over time as there is no evidence that the proportion of widows in the relevant age group increased in the Coventry population. Because women were summoned only when they were the householder, it is also possible to analyse the incidence of female-headed households for the whole period. Most of these women would have been widows, though some could have been deserted wives or even unmarried women. The women summoned as the head of household, assumed here to be widows, made up 8.4% of the total sample of 3166 cases in the Book, but from 1894 onwards, they constituted more than 20% of all cases coming to court. Were widows more or less likely to be prosecuted than two-parent families, even in the 1880s? For the period of 1885-8, out of the sample of 375 cases, there were 39 cases involving widows, representing 10.4% of the sample, but half of the cases involved repeat offences – there are only 25 individual names. The high incidence of repeat offences for non-attendance amongst widows may indicate that the authorities delayed prosecuting them, through an understanding of the difficulties they faced and to

give them more chance to get their children to school than other parents, so prosecution only happened when the problem had become a chronic one. The census shows there were 637 widows between the ages of 25 and 55 in Coventry in 1881 and 664 in 1891, giving an average over the decade of 650. The 25 taken to court over the 3 year period represents less than 4% of this number. The prosecution of 336 other parents in the same period represents just over 5% of the married parents in same age group living in Coventry, averaged over the two census points.<sup>365</sup> This shows that widows were slightly *less* prone to prosecution, although their circumstances, both economically, and in terms of lone responsibility for supervision of the family, would have made it more likely they would face difficulty in getting their children to school.

	No. of cases	Fines %	Attendance Order %	Industrial. School %	Withdrawn %	Conviction Rate %
All	3166	63.83	12.57	1.14	31.33	68.67
Male HoH	2900	65	11.9	0.79	32	68
Female HoH	266	51.13	19.92	4.89	24.06	75.94

Table C

The data in Table C covering all years in the Summons Book shows that cases involving female-headed households had a higher than average conviction rate, but also attracted both the most lenient and the harshest penalties. The reason for the lower rate of fines must have been the patent inability of widows to pay fines, thus magistrates preferred an attendance order. Fewer widows had their cases withdrawn after adjournment, maybe because they had already been given lots of chances to improve. On the other hand, removing a child from the family home was recognised as an extreme remedy for truancy. The children of widows were much more likely to be sent to industrial school as an outcome of a prosecution under the Education Acts; the propensity to dispatch their children, sometimes one after another, to the industrial school indicates magistrates

<sup>365</sup> I have taken the average figure for the number of married women and married men aged 25-55 in Coventry for 1881-91 – this produces a figure of 5.2% in both cases.

considered some of these mothers had lost control of their children, usually sons, or that they were unable to provide an adequate home for them, through lack of income, lack of control over them or simply the burden of having too many children to care for alone. The much lower rate of fines and much higher rate of committals to industrial schools for widow's children signify both moral and economic judgements by magistrates and the school board about the viability of the female-headed household. Widowhood usually resulted in a rapid descent into poverty and marginalisation, with little chance of recovery before the eldest children were of earning age. The committal of children from these families to industrial schools was just one of the bitter fruits of a patriarchal system of justice in a period when Poor Law outrelief was being tightened up considerably and the pressure of school fees was still a problem for these, the poorest parents.

However, Coventry School Board's overall use of industrial schools to punish truancy was relatively modest compared, for instance, with York, and the Coventry Board did not establish a day industrial school like Oxford, where costs of maintenance for such children were correspondingly lower. Only 36 Coventry children were committed to industrial school over the 25 year period from 1874-99. Only 3 of them were girls and typically they were boys aged 10-11. Thirteen of the children came from female-headed households, representing 36% of the total. The consignment of successive children to industrial school occurred rarely, but usually in cases where the mother had moved house frequently, perhaps indicating to the magistrates that the widow concerned could not maintain a stable home for her children.

This initial analysis shows that the prosecution of non-attendance at school had by the 1880s become routinised by the authorities, with 'the usual suspects' brought before the courts on a regular basis. Relatively better-off parents caught up in truancy proceedings in the early days, were by the 1880s either conforming to the law, or had found ways of convincing the authorities that their children were legitimately absent from school. The parents appearing before the courts by this stage were poor, as evidenced at least by their addresses. Some of them were skilled workers, both in the declining trades and the new ones. Widows and female-headed households were especially vulnerable both

economically and in terms of the burden they carried for exercising sole discipline and provision for their children, and in the 1890s they became a key focus for the prosecuting authorities.

### **Family structure and the pattern of truancy over time: a comparison of families prosecuted in Coventry in 1881 and 1891**

A detailed analysis of a sample of families was undertaken to try to illuminate the social and economic background to truancy. Using census information alongside the Summons Book, it was possible to reconstruct the characteristics of a sample of families of truants prosecuted for non-attendance in 1881 and 1891 and to check whether there was any change in the type of families prosecuted between the two dates. The years 1881 and 1891 were chosen as they coincide with the census years and were likely to result in the maximum number of traceable cases on the enumerators' forms. If any other years had been chosen, the data would have suffered a distortion as there was a likelihood of missing families who moved house more frequently. In each case the sample comprised all the parents prosecuted for that year, as listed in the Summons Book, which provides the name and address of the parent, plus the name, age and gender of the truanting child. An electronic search of the relevant census was made to unearth further information on each family – the parents' ages and occupations, their places of birth and the characteristics of the neighbourhood in terms of occupational categories and type of housing. In relation to the child, the birth order and size of family were the major characteristics of interest, though unusual family arrangements, such as step-children or the presence of grand-parents, were also noted.

The sample for 1881 comprised 190 cases prosecuted in that year and the sample for 1891 comprised 97 cases prosecuted – of these only 3 families in each of the sample years proved impossible to trace accurately in the census record. In these cases, the families were not resident in Coventry on census night, or the address they gave to the court was not traceable on the census. In other cases, where a family had moved since the census night, it was possible to confirm they were the same family from the other

information given in the Summons Book. Some families were prosecuted more than once for the same child and others were prosecuted for two different children. For this reason the number of individual families traced and for whom additional data could be found on the census was 163 for 1881 and 81 for 1891. Both of these samples represent a reasonably-sized group to analyse. In all cases, the family was identified using an online index to the relevant census, with some supplementary checking where necessary on the microfiche records held at Coventry Local Studies Library.<sup>366</sup>

In both samples, the rate of re-prosecution was high. Whilst only 6% of parents in the 1881 sample and 8% in the 1891 sample were prosecuted for two different children, a further 7% were prosecuted again for the same child's non-attendance within the year. If one extends the analysis to the end of the following year, the proportion prosecuted for the second or even third time rises to 21% of the sample for 1881 and 22% for 1891.<sup>367</sup> This indicates the relative ineffectiveness of the penalties used by the local authorities and their lack of deterrent effect for a significant minority of parents.

### **The 1881 sample**

The population of Coventry was not a mobile one, and migration was very local, with over 80% of residents born in Coventry or Warwickshire in the period 1871-91.<sup>368</sup>

The analysis of the 1881 sample shows that these families were largely typical of the stability of the Coventry population as a whole, in that 70% of fathers and 63% of mothers were born in Coventry, and very few indeed had moved away during the years of child-bearing, since most of the children in all of these families were also born in the city.

The occupational distribution of the fathers shows a strong bias towards unskilled labourers, with 12.4% of the sample in this category – only 2.9% of the population of

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<sup>366</sup> [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk) and [www.freecen.rootsweb.com/](http://www.freecen.rootsweb.com/) (both cited 5-18.04.2005).

<sup>367</sup> Belfiore, "Family Strategies", p.279 claims 22% of her Essex sample appeared in court 6 or more times over a 5 year period.

<sup>368</sup> Marson, "Coventry: Urban Geography", p.187.

Coventry was recorded in this category in the 1891 census.<sup>369</sup> On the other hand, if one takes all the skilled and semi-skilled occupations together, they form 79% of the sample and there are also 4 employers listed, all small traders.<sup>370</sup> Truancy was not therefore associated predominantly or even mostly with the very poor or unskilled. The occupational structure of Coventry itself was dominated by skilled crafts and the truants came mostly from these families. There is the odd exception to the predominantly working-class defendant in the magistrates' court. Within the sample for 1881, there were parents listed as 'master tailor', 'confectioner' and 'cabinet maker', as well as one running a hat shop and another father recorded in the census as a 'chemical experimentalist', who was clearly from a middle-class background and by 1891 was a factory manager. This was a period of industrial transition, when there were many unoccupied houses in Coventry and short-term fluctuations in the silk and watchmaking trades, causing under-employment. All of these might have been factors in family insecurity for skilled workers on the fringes of craft status. For the silk weavers, this occurred because the domestic workshop system had persisted long after its economic competitiveness was undermined by imports and during the 1870s and 80s it was further undermined by the establishment of factories in Coventry itself. For watchmakers, the dilution of their skills resulted in some workers being reduced to narrowly-defined assembly work in an overstocked labour market. This study exposes the intra-occupational differences of income and status which were not evident from the census labels of these skilled workers. Both watchmakers at 39% of the sample and silk weavers at 20% are over-represented in comparison with their presence in the local population (26% and 12% respectively); this supports the view that they were pressured groups in

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<sup>369</sup> Figures for occupations are not differentiated by registration district with less than 50,000 population in the 1881 census, but there is no reason to believe the proportion would have been much different in 1881. On the other hand, the term 'labourer' is a notoriously amorphous one – some are recorded as 'gas labourer' or 'bricklayer's labourer' and rarely 'agricultural labourer'. Figures for watchmaking, silk and cycles recorded for Warwickshire in 1881 can be taken to apply to Coventry as there was virtually no production elsewhere in Warwickshire and other large centres such as Birmingham were recorded separately.

<sup>370</sup> The differentiation between skilled and semi-skilled work in Coventry is extremely problematic, given the dilution of craft status which was affecting both silk manufacture and watchmaking at the time. Cycle assembly work was replacing much of the older 'skilled' work, and was definitely semi-skilled, but operatives could earn more than the majority of silk weavers and watchmakers.

terms of income and possibly that the need for children's earnings was a factor in causing truancy.

The participation of the mothers in the sample in paid work is notable – almost 45% of them were working, many of them in silk weaving. The proportion of silk weavers' wives in the sample who were working was 70% and almost all of them in the supporting functions of winder, warper, etc. This is a likely indication of the persistence of traditional domestic production amongst the silk weaving families, although some of the mothers could have been working in separate small workshops near to the home. The rate of participation for watchmakers' wives was lower, but at 31%, still seems high given there was a tradition that watchmakers' wives did not undertake paid work. It suggests these men were working in insecure branches of the trade and they needed to supplement their earnings with their wives' income. Most of these working watchmakers' wives were in textiles. Although working mothers were criticised by contemporaries, the participation of married women in paid work outside the home could have had a positive effect on school attendance, since their income would have offset fluctuations in family income, therefore providing more security to the family and placing less reliance on child labour.<sup>371</sup> On the other hand, supervision of children would necessarily have been more difficult if the mother worked outside the household, or at least some distance from it. However, it is possible that some of these mothers were still working at least *near to* home in silk manufacture, since workshops were distributed throughout the central district and the weavers' suburb of the city, interspersed with workers' homes, even in the crowded courtyards, where many of the truants' parents lived.

Though there were some large families in the 1881 sample (including one with 9 children and another with 11), the average size of family was not especially large at 4.6 children, with the truant on average at position 2.4, i.e. squarely in the middle, and the average age of a truant when prosecuted was 10.3 years. The gender balance was 57% boys and 43%

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<sup>371</sup> Jane Humphries, "'Because They Are Too Menny.' Children, Mothers and Fertility Decline: The Evidence from Working-Class Autobiographies of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries", *University of Oxford Discussion Papers in Economic and Social History*, no. 64 (September 2006), p.21 links working mothers with fewer years at school for their children in the pre-compulsory period.

girls. An interesting feature is the fact that the girls in the sample were on average younger truants (age 9.9 as compared with the average of 10.4 for boys), and also a younger child in their family, though the difference in family position between girls and boys is not great (2.6 compared with 2.3). Older girls typically had poorer attendance rates than boys, and this pattern of prosecution of younger girls might suggest a tendency on the part of the authorities not to prosecute for the absences of older girls off school due to home commitments, and also perhaps that the expectations of parents attached less importance to the schooling of girls, as long as they could perform some useful task about the house.

Sulloway suggested that birth order plays a central role in determining temperament into adult life.<sup>372</sup> Whilst eldest children have an interest in conformity due to their early responsibility in the family group, younger children lack this and have to create a niche in the family structure using other strategies, such as rebelliousness. A more refined version of this is the 'middle child' theory put forward by Saraglou and Fiasse who looked at 3-child families and argued that the middle one was more rebellious and impulsive since the youngest gained more attention from parents and thus a special place in the family.<sup>373</sup> Truancy could therefore arise from a 'middle' child's attempts to gain attention and create a 'niche' in the family. Other commentators have argued that birth order has no effects into adulthood, although it may in childhood. Denny concluded that the effects of birth order diminish as childhood progresses – in a study based on OECD data from six countries, he found no significant link between birth order and truancy, although there was some indication of a positive relationship with the middle rather than the youngest child.<sup>374</sup> There appears to be a predominance of middle children in the sample, with 75 out of 174 cases relating to a 'middle' child.<sup>375</sup> The incidence of non-attendance of middle children seems to have been higher as they were of school age at a time when typically the eldest children in the family were relatively new entrants to the workforce

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<sup>372</sup> Frank J. Sulloway, *Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics and Creative Lives* (London: Little, Brown, 1996), passim.

<sup>373</sup> Denny, "Born to Be Wild?" p.3.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.* p.7.

<sup>375</sup> I have interpreted this as including the 2<sup>nd</sup> of 3, 4 or 5 children, as well those strictly in the middle of larger families.

and earned very little, while the family had to support a number of younger dependent children, and the mother was also prevented from contributing to family income as the youngest family members were not yet at school and needed full-time care.<sup>376</sup>

The families in the 1881 sample lived mainly in the poorest type of housing in the centre and in the yards behind the main streets to the west and south. A total of 66% lived in the back-to-back houses in enclosed courts, and 34% lived at addresses fronting roads or streets. This is not a foolproof measure of relative poverty, since some of the side streets in Coventry were well-known for their poor housing and tenements. Coventry was a tightly-packed town, where the reasonably comfortable lived only a stone's throw from the working man and his family. Many of the poorer parents brought to court for non-attendance lived only round the corner from families several steps up from them in income terms living on the main road. However, the distinction between a yard address and a road one provides an effective proxy for comparison with the 1891 sample, since an address in a yard was a more or less clear indication of sub-standard housing.

However, despite the concentration of families in poor-quality housing, the majority of defendants in truancy cases were not the very poorest or destitute, except perhaps those who were widows. Instead these parents were commonly skilled workers, but possibly on the fringes of reliable employment, in a declining trade with some reliance on a working mother to ensure the economic survival of the family. Although these families were not generally larger than the norm, supervision of children was difficult where younger ones demanded the attention of mothers, and in housing which gave a 'natural protection' for children from both the control of parents and that of the authorities, truancy was easily done and prevalent.

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<sup>376</sup> Belfiore, "Family Strategies", p.276 ; Denny, "Born to Be Wild?" p.7-8.

## **The 1891 sample**

The 1891 sample provides a number of contrasts with the 1881 evidence which indicates both a change in the prosecution strategy by the Coventry School Board and some differences in the type of parent brought to court over non-attendance.

Some measures in the 1891 sample, however, are remarkably similar to 1881. For instance, the stability of the city's population was still evident, with 60% of fathers and 69% of mothers born in Coventry. The average age of the fathers at 39.1 years was also very close to the average age for 1881 (40.7 years). Occupationally, the data shows the expected shift away from the traditional trades in silk and watches into cycles and other skilled trades, such as engineering. It also shows a more diverse labour force, with more parents in the 'other skilled or semi-skilled' and 'other unskilled' categories. Labourers and other unskilled workers still formed a significant group of those prosecuted, and at 16.5% of the group, constituted a slightly higher proportion than in the 1881 sample. Silk weavers were also still over-represented in the sample, forming 7.6% as against only 4.7% of the Coventry population in the 1891 census. The number of watchmakers was slightly less than their proportion in the city's workforce, and the proportion of cycle workers, at 20.3% of the sample, matched the proportion of the Coventry male workforce involved in cycle manufacture by 1891 (19.7%). The major growth occupational category since 1881 in the sample was 'other skilled or semi-skilled', rising from 14.4% of the sample in 1881 to 24% in 1891, even though the proportion recorded in the 1891 census in this category was only 9%. This in one sense continues a trend in the 1881 sample, since it was not the poorest in society who formed the bulk of parents prosecuted for truancy. In addition, the 1891 sample includes 5 parents who were employers or sole traders, and their addresses confirm that they were more affluent than the rest of the sample. Four of these 'middle-class' families were larger than the average, which may have made them more prone to non-attendance than other shop-keepers' families, especially where the mother was assisting in the family business.

There were 7 single heads of household shown, forming 8.5% of the sample. Widowers were again more highly-represented than in the general population, since they formed 3.7% of the sample but only 1.7% of the population in the 1891 census. On the other hand, widowers represent 3.9% of the population if only married and widowed men aged 25-55 are considered, so it may be that their numbers are not out of proportion. The size of families in 1891 was the same as for 1881 with 4.6 children, with the average truant again in the middle, at position 2.4. However, the contrast between the girls and boys was greater, since the average age of the girls in this sample was 10.7 years as against the boys at 9.7 and these older girls were also nearer to being the eldest child in the family at position 2.2, whereas the average boy was at position 2.7. The most noticeable difference from 1881 was the increased average age of girls being prosecuted from 9.9 to 10.7 years, whilst the average age of boys had got younger, from 10.4 to 9.7 years. This pattern possibly suggests that parents of older (and elder) girls who were kept at home to assist with domestic duties *were* being prosecuted by 1891 and there had therefore been a change of policy on the part of the School Board.

A much more significant difference between the 1881 and 1891 samples was the dramatic reduction in the incidence of working mothers. There was a significant decline in paid female labour in Coventry between 1861 and 1901, falling from 46% of the employed population to 31.8% over the period.<sup>377</sup> The difference between the participation of the working mothers in the two samples only ten years apart is much greater. The figure for working mothers in the 1881 sample was nearly 45% but only 21% (17) of the 1891 mothers were working, two of them the wives of sole traders, assisting with the business. One inference is that this decline simply reflected the decline in opportunities for women's domestic production in Coventry during the 1880s when silk manufacture in small workshops was replaced by factory work, which was less attractive to married women. New sectors, such as cigar manufacture and factory-based silk production, were providing opportunities for women's employment in Coventry by the 1880s, but these mostly attracted unmarried younger women. There had also never been much employment in domestic service in Coventry as its industrial sectors were

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<sup>377</sup> Marson, "Coventry: Urban Geography", p.112.

dominated by small businesses, sole traders, and master craftsmen who lived only a little more comfortably than the men who worked for them. The participation of married women in the labour force declined in England during the final decades of the nineteenth century, but not to the extent of the fall in this sample. Indeed, there is evidence that in other industrial centres in the West Midlands, women's employment opportunities expanded at this time and more married women entered the workforce.<sup>378</sup> How should we explain the decline in married women's working in the 1891 sample? In fact, it mirrors the demise of the small domestic workshop production of silk ribbon, reflected in a 41% drop in women's employment in silk manufacture over the decade in Coventry.<sup>379</sup> During this same period, there was a 17.6% increase in Coventry's population which meant that the actual numbers of women participating in paid work as a whole decreased only slightly. What the change represents was a significant decline in *married* women's work, particularly mothers' work, and this appears to have been greater than the average fall in women's participation in the paid labour force overall.

It is possible that the difference in the rate of married working mothers between the 1881 and 1891 sample represents a social difference in the families being prosecuted at the two dates. Another explanation is that for the 1891 census, enumerators were recording women's paid employment on a less systematic basis and this affected the census records. Whilst plausible, such a change would be more likely where the majority of married women were working in 'domestic' employments, such as charring and laundry work. In fact, there is some recording of this type of work in both samples, but the bulk of working mothers in both samples were working in silk manufacture and in 1891, they were more likely to be working outside the home in a factory than in 1881. A better explanation for the change is that the social profile of those prosecuted had changed somewhat to include more families able to rely predominantly on a breadwinner's income.

This theory is supported by the evidence about the type of housing the families occupied. Although certain streets appear in both samples, a major shift is observable in the type of

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<sup>378</sup> Sandler, "Adolescents in Birmingham", p.30.

<sup>379</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1893-4*, cvi (7058), pp.316, 332 compared with figures for Warwickshire in *Parliamentary Papers 1883*, lxxx vol.III (3722), Table 10, p.301.

housing occupied by the families in the 1891 sample. Only 36% of them lived at addresses in enclosed yards or courts, whereas 64% are recorded living on main streets or roads. There was no significant slum clearance in Coventry between the two dates to account for this change.<sup>380</sup> The neighbourhoods for some of the streets were obviously as poor as any court or yard, but there is a significant difference in the occupational profile of several neighbourhoods and of some of the families. One parent of a truant was listed on the census as 'bicycle manufacturer's clerk', lodging with the parent of another truant, and a further lodger in the house was a 'steam engine maker'. Several working in the cycle industry lived in the new streets to the east of the city. Two fathers were journeymen carpenters living next door to each other – their sons had probably truanted together. Another, a cycle worker, had a carpenter, hairdresser, butcher and church army captain as neighbours. Yet another lived close to the school attendance officer. The difference in addresses in the sample, taken together with the much lower incidence of working mothers points to a shift in the status of those coming to the attention of the school board. Even so, not a single parent prosecuted in the 1891 sample lived in the more select watchmakers' district of Chapelfields. But they were spread more widely across Coventry, suggesting that the earlier policy of 'truancy blitzes' of certain poor areas of the city had given way to a more systematic pursuit of long-term or intermittent absentees using school attendance data. This still included the very poor, whose children may have been truanting to supplement family income or release the mother to work, but it hints also at the diversity of causation in this form of non-conformity, so that even by 1891 non-economic reasons formed a major proportion of the underlying causes of truancy in Coventry. It may be that truancy in the late nineteenth century was composed of two 'types' – one rooted in family poverty and social marginality, the other based on more pathological causes related to the family or the child.

Were the 'repeat offenders' more likely to be the very poor? If one takes as the two key indicators of relative affluence, the address and the incidence of working mothers, the

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<sup>380</sup> A.T. Mallier, "Housing in Coventry: The Development of Municipal Action 1890-1908" (unpublished M.Soc.Sc. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1969), p.24 notes that house building recovered in the 1880s, but Marson, "Coventry: Urban Geography", p.187 shows that housing density was greater by 1891 than in 1881.

group of 're-offending' parents in 1881 was little different to the rest of the sample in terms of the type of housing occupied, but the rate of working mothers was slightly higher at 50%. For 1891, the 'repeat offenders' had exactly the same profile as the whole sample for working mothers (21%) but rather more of them lived at courtyard addresses (55%) than on the main streets, a different but perhaps just as interesting indicator of slightly worse conditions amongst these families.

The data from 1891 is interesting also because non-payment of school fees was less likely to have been the cause of prosecution for non-attendance. From September 1891, elementary schooling was provided free of charge in Coventry board schools and the dip in prosecutions in 1891 (they rose back to 147 in 1892) may indicate a 'holding off' by the authorities in the expectation that attendance by children from very poor families would improve the following year.<sup>381</sup> Thus the prosecutions seem to focus partly on a somewhat different group of parents, more affluent and more widely dispersed across the city. The reasons for their children's truancy were likely to be more varied also.

## **Conclusions**

Is it possible to detect any trends in the type of family and child involved in truancy and explain them within the wider national context? Routine non-attendance had been a feature of working-class life in the 1870s and 80s and in some areas of Coventry, whole neighbourhoods were targeted for court action. This case study suggests that the influence of the neighbourhood was perhaps a critical factor – evidence from Coventry shows that non-attendance was less associated simply with parental occupation than where one lived, which itself may have been more influenced by family size and regularity of income, as well as the permanence of one's employment. This conclusion is not surprising since the close communities of slum housing would naturally tend towards shared habits and behaviour over the schooling of children and family life generally.

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<sup>381</sup> CoSB *Mins.* 31.12.1891.

The Coventry evidence seems to show that skipping school from time to time was a widespread practice in poorer districts and simply a matter of course for many working-class children of the time. Enforcement of school attendance became more focused on the recalcitrant and repeat offender, especially after the ending of fees in 1891. Absences caused by children being sent home to fetch the school pence and kept off when there was no money, ended with the introduction of free education, but so also did the excuse which some had no doubt used to enable them to have their children out of school for other reasons. Poverty was still an under-current to much of the non-attendance which reached the courts. However, there was no simple link between poverty and truancy – most of the poorest sent their children to school regularly enough to satisfy the authorities. The latter were dealing with the ordinary working population of Coventry, not simply the poorest and lowest, though of course, some of the defendants were in this category both economically and socially. Family circumstances must have been crucial to the decisions of some parents to make calls on their children's time or labour to support the family at times of perceived need, but this was not the case with all of the families in the samples. And it was less the case in 1891, when the families involved in truancy seem to have been on average slightly better off than those in the 1881 sample. For some of those who were prosecuted in 1891, it may have been more a case of parental attitude than poverty which led to persistent non-attendance.

During the 1890s, Coventry underwent a minor boom associated with the cycle trade, a factor which should have lifted more families out of chronic poverty and improved regular school attendance. By the mid-1890s, prosecutions had declined significantly, from an average of 146 per year in the 1880s to 79 per year in the 1890s, though the fall after 1893 was most marked. Certainly attendance rates had improved, and irregularity decreased. Within the declining number of prosecutions in the 1890s, more repeat offenders were being taken to court, indicating that the authorities were concentrating on a small group of recalcitrant parents, who had resisted all the pressures of the attendance monitoring system and prosecution. Those prosecuted included a higher proportion of widows, but apart from this, the sample shows that the poorest districts were no longer being targeted in a systematic way, and a wider range of socio-economic background was

therefore evident amongst the parents involved. If truancy was no longer a problem associated with particular districts of the city, it was perhaps associated with particular families who were judged to have been resistant to the law and a bad influence on others. Unfortunately figures for attendance in this period have not survived. In 1902, Coventry's annual average attendance rate was 86.1%, two points above the average for county boroughs and close to similar West Midlands centres of population, such as Birmingham and Wolverhampton.<sup>382</sup> By the end of the century, court prosecutions nationally had diminished but prosecution for non-attendance was also routinised and local authorities commonly complained of the fact that certain families were seen again and again in court, with no improvement in their behaviour. The Bradford Board in its report for 1900 claimed 'the class of parent now to be dealt with for neglect are mostly those who not only wilfully and persistently fail to send their children to school, but who evince neither care for nor interest in their children's present or future physical and moral well-being.'<sup>383</sup> The Board was expressing its concern with wider aspects of child welfare beyond simply school attendance and its more demanding expectations of parents. At the time, Margaret McMillan was a member of the Board and one of the chief exponents of intervention in the early years of childhood to educate parents in childcare.<sup>384</sup> This shows that whatever had happened to the profile of families involved in truancy in Coventry, there had been a considerable change in the expectations of parents by many local authorities. For this reason, families which did not appear to conform to these more demanding norms of childcare came to the notice of local authorities more readily.

Perhaps family life in most working-class homes had become more orderly by the end of the century, with a social expectation of punctuality and regular attendance at work and school, possibly assisted by the growing influence of the temperance movement. Long-term employment with a regular wage provided security for more working-class families – and working-class leisure, with many more organised clubs and activities, was not

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<sup>382</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1903*, li (1476), Table 7, pp.386-9.

<sup>383</sup> *BradSB Triennial Reports 1900*.

<sup>384</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain: Margaret Mcmillan 1860-1931* (London: 1990), pp.44-6.

associated solely with the public house.<sup>385</sup> The attractions of the home as a place for family recreation went hand in hand with the cult of cleanliness. Schooling also set a regulated day for children, which was demanding for adults, especially the mother, but it was also a means of ensuring they were safe and no trouble to the neighbours. These cultural changes might have differentiated working-class families somewhat more than in earlier decades, with slackness over the children's attendance at school denoting the 'rougher' families in the neighbourhood. However, as the evidence from Coventry has shown, truants did not all come from the 'rough' quarters of the town, but the social differences between urban schools tended to concentrate the problems of behaviour and non-attendance which still persisted at the end of the century.<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp.93, 138-9.

<sup>386</sup> Marsden, "Social Environment", pp.226.

## Chapter 5 – ‘After the Deluge’ – School Attendance and Truancy in the age of the LEA

**‘Truancy in the proper sense of the word has greatly declined, and in some towns almost ceased to exist; so that committals [to industrial school] on the mere ground of failure to attend school are now comparatively rare’<sup>387</sup>**

### **Introduction**

There is a belief amongst some historians that truancy had ceased to be an issue for the school authorities by 1914.<sup>388</sup> This is not surprising, given the fact that this view was expressed by contemporaries as well. In their commentary on the day industrial schools published in 1913, the Departmental Committee on Reformatory and Industrial Schools attributed the decline in truancy partly to the provision of school meals and concluded that children had been sent to such schools in the past mainly because of their extreme poverty or because their working widowed or deserted mothers needed a school which provided three meals a day.

One could be forgiven for assuming that there was little scope for more than marginal improvements in elementary school attendance by the end of the century. After 1880, the implementation of compulsion was gradual but persistent, with continuous improvements in average attendance over the ensuing twenty year period. Yet there was an impressive and surprising increase in average attendance in the period 1899-1909 which needs to be explained and its underlying trends uncovered. This decade of improvement in attendance rates across the country does not fully explain important changes which took place in policy over the prosecution and punishment of truants at the same time. The decline of day industrial schools accompanied a fall in local authority prosecutions for non-attendance at school. The steep decline in prosecutions started before the end of the century and attendance averages showed their greatest increase after that date, whilst the

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<sup>387</sup> Parliamentary Papers 1913, *Report of the Departmental Committee on Reformatory and Industrial Schools*, xxxix (6838), p.64.

<sup>388</sup> Dietrich Oberwittler, "The Decline of Correctional Education, Ca.1900-1920. England and Germany Compared", *European Journal of Crime, Criminal Law and Criminal Justice* 7, no. 1 (1999), p.33; Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, pp.203-4; Davin, *Growing Up*, p.216.

decline in the need for day industrial schools had been unforeseen as late as 1896, when the Departmental Committee on Reformatories and Industrial Schools had praised them and recommended expansion of their numbers.<sup>389</sup> The views of the Departmental Committee in 1913 reflect two converging trends in the early years of the twentieth century. The first trend was the arousal of new concerns about the welfare of the child, fittingly reflected in the belief expressed by the Committee that the provision of school dinners had removed most of the purpose of the day industrial school by improving school attendance. The belief that extreme poverty was a prime cause of truancy illustrates a shift in attitudes towards families of truants and an attempt to understand the underlying causes of truancy, rather than simply to punish parents into compliance. In the period to 1914, this idea was gaining ground, but at local level it by no means dominated the thinking of most of those responsible for day-to-day enforcement of attendance. Secondly, the panic over juvenile crime had subsided significantly since the 1870s and 80s, when the threat of children ‘on the streets’ can easily be said to be the over-riding concern of middle-class elites in the urban areas. It was a constant thread running through the discussions of school boards and attendance committees in the twenty years following compulsory schooling. By 1900, this concern had been addressed, via a combination of provision of school places and better enforcement of attendance, at least in the towns and cities. Thus the prime deterrent purpose of day industrial schools – they were highly visible in the community – was less needed in most places (though it appears that Liverpool was an exception as five day industrial schools were still in operation there in 1913).<sup>390</sup>

Certainly by 1900, average school attendance levels were at more acceptable levels, particularly in towns, and irregularity had reduced. However, the phenomenon of non-attendance at school continued to cause concern to the authorities. So much so, the period after 1904 saw *increased* investment in school attendance departments by many local authorities. There was a growth of a type of analysis of the defects of working-class family life which recommended intervention and even removal of children from their

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<sup>389</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1896, Report on Reformatory and Industrial Schools*, p.25-6.

<sup>390</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1913, Report on Reformatory and Industrial Schools*, p.62.

homes to prevent harm caused by so-called ‘evil surroundings’. Child-saving was becoming more of a preoccupation of those in authority who interacted with the working-classes – both in the elected and voluntary sphere.<sup>391</sup> The influence of an analysis of children’s needs based on ideal conceptions of the family and the interventions which followed form the basis of the major shifts in policy which were evident in the declining rate of truancy prosecutions, and a shift in local authority emphasis towards therapeutic approaches to truancy, rather than punitive ones – a process which began in the early years of the twentieth century.

### Attendance and absence in elementary schools 1900-14

The Board of Education continued to collect and publish detailed attendance statistics after 1899 in much the same format as its predecessor department. In fact, the creation of the new local education authorities allowed both more reliable and more differentiated figures to be published, highlighting the progress of the major urban areas (mostly county boroughs) against that of the surrounding counties.

Do the statistics show that attendance should no longer have caused serious worry? Certainly there was a continued upward trajectory in average attendance figures, but it would be wrong to conclude that this was just an incremental improvement. In fact, the pace of improvement quickened in the period 1899-1909, as Table D below demonstrates.

Decennial Improvements in Average Attendance							
	1879	1889	% Diff.	1899	% Diff.	1909	% Diff.
England	70.14	77.46	7.32	82.13	4.67	90.00	7.87
Wales	66.66	75.18	8.52	77.65	2.47	87.42	9.77
Total	69.93	77.33	7.40	81.87	4.54	89.81	7.94

TABLE D

Sources: Committee of Council on Education Annual Reports, *Parliamentary Papers 1880*, xxii (2562-1), p.42, *1890* xxviii (6079-1), p.48; Board of Education Annual Reports, *Parliamentary Papers 1900*, xix vol.III (330), pp.462-5 (16-19 online version), *1910*, lxxi (5355), pp.129,407.

<sup>391</sup> Hendrick, *Child Welfare*, pp.41-2.

The percentage improvements exceed even the period following the initial implementation of compulsory attendance in 1880, and are much more impressive than anything seen in the 1890s, when the ending of school fees and a tightening up of factory acts might have been expected to have an impact. A further rise in the school leaving age was implemented from 1900. There is no way to know whether this helped improve average attendance. However, the significant increases in terms of average attendance for both England and Wales were concentrated in the years 1903-6. This suggests a strong link with the introduction of LEAs, from the initial impact of reorganisation on attendance monitoring. This impressive rate of change did not persist beyond 1909, when attendance averages across England and Wales were all near 90%; there was much more consistency between different regions, and between urban and rural areas. In fact, pushing attendance rates much above 90% was always going to be difficult, given the incidence of childhood epidemic disease (see Table G below, page 173).

Decennial Increases in Elementary School Population on Roll England and Wales							
	1879	1889	% inc.	1899	% inc.	1909	% inc.
Total	3710883	4779903	28.81	5672403	18.67	5939817	4.71

TABLE E

For sources see Table D above.

The relative stability of the school population in this period, as shown in Table E, may have allowed schools and LEAs to implement their policies on enforcement and reorganise their practice with fewer extra calls on their resources. It must also have lessened pressure for school places, during a period when new building and increased staffing with qualified teachers were improving the quality of elementary education generally. The percentage increases in attendance represent in absolute terms many more children at their desks on a daily basis than for the earlier decades – given that they were percentage improvements on a bigger initial number on roll. Staying on full-time at school beyond age 12 had also become commoner since 1900.<sup>392</sup> The Board of Education thought this was due to the impact of the 1899 Act which allowed local authorities to include children up to the age of 14 within the attendance bye-laws, though it also forced them to make provision for children to leave at 13 on the basis of

<sup>392</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1905*, xxv (2271), p.37.

attendance alone.<sup>393</sup> In urban areas, outside of Lancashire and West Yorkshire, half-time working was the resort of the very poor, but most working-class parents expected their children to be able to claim the attendance exemption to leave school completely at 13.<sup>394</sup> However, the Board of Education had to admit that despite their critical comments on the half-time system, the number of half-timers did not decrease significantly after 1900, though their numbers were concentrated increasingly in the textile districts.<sup>395</sup>

Is it possible to detect what was happening to average attendance at local level? The reduction in the number of separate authorities from 3,351 to 328 enabled the publication of more differentiated statistics, which allow a contrast between towns and the rural areas surrounding them.<sup>396</sup> Lower recorded absence rates and increased regularity of attendance were noticeable almost everywhere, but the biggest changes involved bringing the weaker areas up towards the levels of the better ones. Rural areas in particular were catching up on the attendance levels in towns. Although percentage attendance was on average still higher in urban areas, towns with a strong tradition of child labour had the lowest attendance rates, though even these had closed the gap considerably on the best performers by 1914.

For the weaker areas, the ‘catch up’ was surprisingly rapid – in 1899, the ‘worst’ areas were still those on the fringes, or where child labour predominated in the local economy. Thus, Ely in the Fens, Cornwall, Herefordshire and Monmouthshire on the Welsh borders, and Wales itself all had attendance rates below 80% due not only to the fact that they were rural areas and sparsely populated. Difficulties had been experienced from the start in implementing compulsory attendance in the ‘outer reaches’ of the country and the reasons for this may partly be cultural as well as administrative, especially in Wales where there was intense resistance to the imposition of rate aid to church schools in

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<sup>393</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1901*, xix (756), p.11.

<sup>394</sup> *YSAC Mins.* 13.2.1882; Leicestershire County Council Attendance Sub-Committee *LeCountAC Register of Exemption from School Attendance*.

<sup>395</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1906*, xxviii (2783), p.30; Winstanley (ed.), *Working Children*, chap.1.

<sup>396</sup> Previously only county totals were reported in the Annual Report. See Board of Education Statistics for Public Elementary Schools and Training Colleges 1902-14.

1902.<sup>397</sup> Lancashire also had an average attendance rate below 80% and it was here that half-time labour was now increasingly concentrated. By 1902, all counties in England were above 80%, though the rural areas of Lancashire at that point had better attendance rates than its specialised textile districts, such as Blackburn and Oldham, which were still below 80% average attendance. By 1904, several rural counties achieved attendance rates of 87-88%, including Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Gloucestershire, Isle of Wight, Leicestershire, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire, Staffordshire, Suffolk, West Sussex and Warwickshire. Though there are no northern counties in the group, it is a very wide geographical spread across eastern, central and southern England, indicating a consistent improvement in school attendance across rural areas. Many towns and cities were also achieving much higher attendance levels – Birmingham with 87.7% had a progressive local authority which invested in its schools and a well-organised attendance department – similarly, Manchester and Leeds registered over 88% average attendance. Places as diverse as Brighton, Bristol, Coventry, Devonport, Grimsby, Ipswich, Hull, Northampton, Oxford, Southampton, Sunderland, Wolverhampton, Yarmouth and York had all reached 87-88%. Star of them all was Leicester with 92.1%, attributed to its system of enforcement, which included same-day follow-up by attendance officers.<sup>398</sup> Perhaps the high levels of attendance and consistency of the towns are less surprising, since the transfer of responsibility from school board to LEA involved less disruption to schools and attendance departments than in rural areas. Towns which lagged behind were mostly concentrated in Lancashire and West Yorkshire, especially Bradford, where average attendance declined from 83.4% in 1908 to 82% by 1914 for peculiar local reasons associated with the operation of its bye-laws (see below page 171).

By 1908, there was consistency across all English rural counties, with all of them attaining 88% except Herefordshire (87.9%). This was aided by the removal of infants aged 3-5 from the figures – although these infants were a small proportion of the elementary school population at this date. The difference between the best and worst

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<sup>397</sup> N.D. Darglish, *Educational Policy-Making in England and Wales: The Crucible Years, 1895-1911* (London: Woburn Press, 1996), pp.255-77.

<sup>398</sup> Behlmer, *Friends of the Family*, p.103.

counties was only 5.6%, with two-thirds of them over 90% average attendance and even Lancashire and West Yorkshire above 88%. Most county boroughs and the metropolitan areas, including London, were near or over 90% by 1910 and remained at that level until the outbreak of war in 1914. This was a remarkable achievement despite the relative lack of progress in terms of family poverty and child labour in these years.<sup>399</sup> High levels of attendance were attained in spite of two increases in the age of school leaving (1893 and 1900). The effects of these were weakened by the continuation of various loopholes which allowed exemption for early leaving and half-time working. Nonetheless, the proportion of 12-13 year olds in elementary education did rise, although the de facto leaving age for most working-class children was 13, rather than 14, which the law set as the upper age limit of compulsory state education.<sup>400</sup>

	Nos. enrolled	Nos. in average attendance	Percentage in average attendance
1890	4,825,560	3,732,327	77.34
1900	5,705,675	4,687,796	82.16
1910	6,037,535	5,364,106	88.85
1920	5,966,805	5,198,906	87.13
1930	5,993,146	5,336,816	89.05

TABLE F

For sources see Table D above.

If one compares the same figures in Table F for the four decades from 1890, then the Edwardian decade can be seen as a high point in elementary school attendance and in parental compliance with the law, which was maintained in the twenty years after World War 1. This 'plateau' achieved by 1910 pre-dates the impact of much of the welfare legislation relating to childhood nutrition and medical inspection. It also comes before a significant trend in the decline of working-class family size typical of the inter-war period.<sup>401</sup> As shown earlier, it coincides with a period of stability in terms of the elementary school population, and increased expenditure on schools and on the

<sup>399</sup> B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life*, Centennial Edition (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2000), pp.304-5; Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, pp.210-1; Ian Gazeley, *Poverty in Britain, 1900-65* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp.11,16.

<sup>400</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1906*, xxviii (2783), p.30.

<sup>401</sup> Szreter, *Fertility*, p.520 – the connection between family size and school attendance in this period is unclear. Lancashire, where smaller families were popular by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, also had the highest absence rates, mainly due to the resilience of the child labour market.

enforcement of compulsory attendance. Historians portray this period as one of slowly improving living standards, despite the continuing evidence of considerable poverty and slum housing.<sup>402</sup> It is possible that the relative social and demographic stability of many working-class communities contributed to the effectiveness of surveillance by the school authorities and to community reinforcement of social norms relating to regular attendance at school.

However, these aggregate figures may have concealed a variety of local differences in terms of attendance levels and they do not show whether the absolute numbers of persistent truants was falling, as this could have been masked by an improvement in the average attendance of the majority of children. It is not possible from these figures alone to determine whether the chief impetus for improvement was from a national level, via the new Board of Education, or due to the introduction of the new local education authorities, or even to changes in schools themselves. It is important to look also at changes in local authorities' policies over attendance emerging in this period in tandem with and to an extent as a result of the raft of welfare legislation relating to schoolchildren from 1906 onwards.

### **The Board of Education – policies on attendance and the school leaving age**

Historians have associated policy on elementary education in this period very much with powerful personalities at the new Board of Education, especially Robert Morant. Despite his powerful influence in terms of elementary school curriculum and secondary education, policy on attendance was an area of continuity. Although the Board signalled its preference for raising school leaving ages and restricting partial exemption for half-time labour, their approach was still hesitant and permissive. Following the Elementary (School Attendance) Act 1899, the Board noted that out of 1300 new sets of bye-laws they had approved, only 150 authorities had not extended the school leaving age to 14, though most of the others retained the exemption for attendance, the so-called 'dunce's

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<sup>402</sup> Bernard Harris, *The Origins of the British Welfare State: Society, State and Social Welfare in England and Wales, 1800-1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp.125-35, 150-65.

certificate'. The Board thought that by raising the annual average attendance required over the previous five years from 250 sessions (half-days) to 350, they had tightened up on this easy exit for 13 year olds and this would encourage more regularity of attendance overall, but it was hardly a difficult hurdle as it still allowed up to 50 days of absence in a year, the typical school year consisting of 400-450 sessions. Similarly, the 1903 legislation on child employment lacked any teeth and it was only in 1918 that all local authorities were compelled to license and restrict street trading by juveniles and regulate child employment outside school hours.

The pressure on schools and authorities to improve attendance, however, had increased due to indirect causes. In terms of grant funding, attendance counted for more following the ending of any form of payment by results in 1895. In infant schools, grant funding was paid entirely on the average attendance, with a higher payment for schools where the children were taught by a certificated teacher in their own classroom. On the other hand, the Code for 1905 removed under 5s from the official statistics, as LEAs were now not obliged to provide places for them at school, though many continued to.<sup>403</sup> This instantly improved the attendance figures for infant departments, which were always weaker due to the higher incidence of infectious disease in younger children, and mothers' preference for keeping younger children at home in poor weather, especially in rural areas where distances to walk to school were greater.<sup>404</sup> For older scholars, special grants were paid for the 'class subjects', such as cookery – in part a steer by the Board to broaden the curriculum at elementary level. However, the bulk of central funding was still for average annual attendance and this placed more responsibility on schools to improve their weaker scholars, who under the old regime might have failed the annual exam, and to concentrate on aggregate attendance by all children, rather than just the persistent absentees. It also put some pressure on schools and local authorities to collect accurate attendance figures and on inspectors to verify school registers at their annual visit. In a rare case, a headmaster who had been found to have falsified his school's registers was summarily

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<sup>403</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1906*, xxviii (2783), p.25; HaECSAC *Hastings SAC 22.6.1908*.

<sup>404</sup> HaECSAC *Hastings SAC 17.1.1910* – the Attendance Officers asked for the names of under-5s to be removed from the registers during the winter months.

dismissed by the new Leicestershire LEA following a letter from the Board of Education.<sup>405</sup>

Generally, the Board acted against a local authority only where there was flagrant ignoring of the compulsory attendance legislation. This ‘softly, softly’ approach by the Board probably reflected the realities of a situation in which enforcement had to rely on the goodwill and limited resources of smaller local authorities in the pre-LEA era, particularly in rural areas. In 1901, the HMI for Bath recorded, ‘a glaring instance of irregularity pervading a whole school under connivance of the managers, as employers of illicit labour.’ He added that the ‘steps taken under stress of the Board of Education, “had no beneficial effect, because not followed up. The attendance officer, who holds four other appointments, had not visited the school for four weeks previous to my last visit.”<sup>406</sup> HMIs were also critical of the accuracy of attendance statistics in rural areas before 1903.<sup>407</sup> The confusion caused by variations in bye-laws between neighbouring districts, and the loopholes opened via the contradictions between statutes and local bye-laws led to a call for the consolidation and simplification of the law from the inter-Departmental Committee on the Employment of School Children.<sup>408</sup> In fact, this was only effected partially as a by-product of the 1902 Education Act.

Though the Board expressed overall a sense of satisfaction, even complacency, with attendance levels in elementary schools, they recognised that certain groups, such as canal boat families, were able to evade the law with impunity. Like its predecessor, the Board put some pressure on local authorities for monitoring of children on the boats. In 1906 they reported an increase in prosecutions by LEAs, but accepted that it was virtually impossible to get children into school regularly while families travelled from place to place on a daily basis. At that time, the Board estimated that approximately 1,000 children of elementary school age were living on canal boats.<sup>409</sup> The rather wistful paragraph, repeated in several annual reports, expressing the hope that the employers

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<sup>405</sup> Leicestershire County Council Attendance Sub-Committee LeCountAC *Minutes* 23.9.1905.

<sup>406</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1901*, xix (756), p.130.

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*, p.134.

<sup>408</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1902*, xxiv (1275), p.40.

<sup>409</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1906*, xxviii (2783), p.119.

would ban children on their boats and force the families to live ashore was, as the Board well knew, entirely disingenuous. It was clearly in the interests of the haulage companies to keep the families on the boats as unpaid labour and although the numbers of children on boats declined, this was more as a result of a decline in the narrow-boat haulage business than out of concern for family welfare.<sup>410</sup>

### **The effects of the new LEAs on attendance**

The controversial aspects of the Balfour Act have been thoroughly debated by historians. It is arguable that provisions relating to elementary education were subsidiary in policy terms to the development of secondary provision. However, in terms of local authority reorganisation, historians since then have portrayed it either as an opportunity missed or alternatively as a positive springboard for improvement.<sup>411</sup> In terms of attendance, it should be judged as the latter, since the reduction in the number of authorities enabled both the rationalisation of enforcement machinery and the release of more resources to fund school attendance monitoring.

The noticeable improvement in average attendance across the country in the period 1903-6 coinciding closely with the introduction of LEAs suggests that mundane but consistent improvements in administration and attendance monitoring may have had a significant effect on attendance rates. More full-time attendance officers, increased follow-up of absentees and better communication between school and attendance department could have made a critical difference in attendance levels in both rural and urban areas. Behlmer has contested the direct contribution of better surveillance on elementary school attendance in this period.<sup>412</sup> It is true that these changes were not made in isolation. They have to be set in the context of a trend in policies on school attendance, away from punishments to rewards for good attendance and this was accompanied by other

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<sup>410</sup> Paul Bowen, "English Canal-Boat Children and the Education Issue 1900-1940: Towards a Concept of Traveller Education?" *History of Education* 30, no. 3 (2001), p.365.

<sup>411</sup> B. Simon, *Education and the Labour Movement, 1870-1920* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1965), pp.237-46; Roy Lowe, "A Century of Local Education Authorities: What Has Been Lost?" *Oxford Review of Education* 28, no. 2 & 3 (2002), pp.149-54.

<sup>412</sup> Behlmer, *Friends of the Family*, p.102.

improvements in the provision of elementary schools and the curriculum which were likely to increase the attraction of school to children and parents.

There was probably more noticeable change in the rural areas, where large county authorities took over responsibilities from tiny school boards or parish school attendance committees organised under the Poor Law Guardians. In his Report for 1900, the Chief Inspector for the South West analysed the failings of the enforcement system,

A need is felt for a competent authority to enquire into the class of person generally selected to perform the duty of attendance officer, and into his remuneration, and to ensure that the rules laid down for his action are under real supervision and properly carried out. If none of these points are subjected to superior control, and if there is no authority to see that such control is exercised, it can scarcely be a matter for surprise if these duties are neglected or very perfunctorily performed.... Mr Gordon's statistics extend over twelve Unions, and show that twenty-four Attendance Officers are employed to visit 254 schools: all but one of these are also Relieving Officers, and several have other duties besides.... Their remuneration varies from £25 to £5, £10 being the most usual sum.<sup>413</sup>

After 1903, local education authorities changed the procedures for monitoring attendance, and often took on new staff at rates of pay closer to the lower range of a teacher's pay or a similar civil service rank. In Buckinghamshire, for example, all the previous arrangements for school attendance monitoring were changed, with new full-time personnel replacing the (literally) old part-time attendance officers. The stipulation that new attendance officers were to be aged 25-35 meant a relatively youthful and energetic team on the job, and at salaries which compared with those in urban areas. In addition, consideration of cases of non-attendance was no longer being carried out by Poor Law Guardians as a tail-end and relatively unimportant piece of business at their monthly meeting.<sup>414</sup> What we see is a process of bureaucratic standardisation flowing from the operation of the Balfour Act, with rural areas now subject to the same controls and enforcement systems as the towns. Spending on school attendance showed a rapid rise in investment by the new LEAs. In 1905-6, spending on salaries of attendance officers and others dealing with children out of school rose by 18.7%, with an accompanying rise of

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<sup>413</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1901*, xix (756), p.130.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, p.80.

15% in spending on legal and office costs in the same year. After that date, increases in spending on salaries were modest, reflecting only the gradual inflation of the period and spending on legal costs fell.<sup>415</sup> The impact of this investment was seen directly in the swift improvement in attendance rates.

In urban authorities, there was much continuity over the provision of elementary education, yet the appointment of powerful and influential directors of education in a number of authorities affected both the resources and the strategy for dealing with school attendance.<sup>416</sup> Crombie asserts that, 'by providing the unity and stability so notably absent from education in the nineteenth century, the new bureaucracy made a dramatic break with the past.'<sup>417</sup> Relationships with managers of 'non-provided' schools, as the voluntary schools were now called, could be ticklish, but nonetheless, the authority wielded the power when it came to money, and they tended to call the tune. The impression from the minutes of new LEA committees is of a burst of energy and commitment in the early years following the reorganisation. In Leicestershire for instance, the new young Director of Education, William Brockington, completely revised the system for attendance monitoring at virtually his first meeting with the Attendance Sub-Committee. The School Attendance Officers were all asked to apply for new jobs, some at lower rates and less favourable terms. All voluntary schools were brought into a standardised system of reporting of absences which aimed to improve communication and speed of response by attendance officers, but it also involved headteachers reporting absences promptly and school managers interviewing parents of absentees on a regular basis. It was a bold and clever system of monitoring for the whole county, covering many rural schools and set up in response to specific complaints from inspectors about the poor state of Leicestershire's smaller schools, often with under-qualified or inadequate staff

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<sup>415</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1918, Statistical Abstract for the UK*, xxiv (9137), p.395.

<sup>416</sup> Peter Gordon, Richard Aldrich, and Denis Dean, *Education and Policy in England in the Twentieth Century* (London: The Woburn Press, 1991), p.27; Sandler, "Adolescents in Birmingham", p.79.

<sup>417</sup> Annie Crombie, "A Free Hand and Ready Help? The Supervision and Control of Elementary Education in Staffordshire c.1902-1914", *Oxford Review of Education* 28, no. 2 &3 (June 2002), pp.174, 185; Daghish, *Educational Policy-Making*, pp.446-7.

and poor attendance rates. Within the first quarter of the new system's operation, average attendance in the county's schools rose from 84.4% to 88%.<sup>418</sup>

Another feature which added to efficiency in this period was much greater investment in office support, with female clerks, typewriters and new paperwork to make the task of following up absentees more accurate and swifter. Some authorities adopted the 'Leicester system' of double registers so that the whole pattern of attendance for the previous weeks was laid out for the Officer, rather than just the names of recent absentees. The production of warning notices, letters and summonses was also streamlined for the attendance staff via clerical help. Some of the other obstacles to rural enforcement were also weakened by transport improvements – by 1914, the Superintendent at Aylesbury had moved onto a motorcycle, with a fuel allowance, and ordinary officers in the towns could abandon their bicycles, as tram concessions were negotiated to enable them to get across their districts cheaply and quickly.<sup>419</sup>

Other policy trends were also visible even before 1900 in the way that local authorities approached poor attendance. Some school boards were moving away from prosecution in the 1890s, though that did not imply a reduction in follow-up of families whose children were irregular at school. The Coventry data reviewed in Chapter 4 shows that by the late 1890s, the authority was concentrating its prosecutions on the 'hard core' – mostly parents who were repeat offenders and those in extreme poverty, such as widows. The implication is that irregularity amongst the majority of children was not judged to be at a level or of a kind to warrant the expense and time involved in prosecution of the parents. On the other hand, one could view it as a more targeted approach than the 'scattergun' tendency to summons all the fathers of persistent truants. It is noticeable that the rate of conviction increased greatly in the 1890s in Coventry. Similarly, the London School Board undertook 28,836 prosecutions in 1900, of which 26,119 were successful.<sup>420</sup> The increase in the level of maximum fine from 1900 onwards to 20 shillings might have

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<sup>418</sup> LeCountAC *Mins.* 11.7.1903, 26.3.1904.

<sup>419</sup> Buckinghamshire County Council BuCC *School Attendance Assistant Committee Minutes* 7.9.1914.

<sup>420</sup> Stuart Maclure, *One Hundred Years of London Education, 1870-1970* (London: Allen Lane Penguin Press, 1970), p.34.

proved a realistic deterrent to parents, but it did not spur local authorities to undertake more prosecutions, despite the fact that many of them had complained about the previous 5s maximum. In fact, any fine imposed on parents for non-attendance was still subject to the magistrates' discretion and there is no sign that relationships between magistrates and the school authorities improved during this period.<sup>421</sup>

By the mid-1890s, prosecutions were in steep decline, firstly in urban areas, to be followed by the rural areas after 1904. There was a minor peak around 1900, possibly linked to the increase in the school leaving age under the 1899 Act, with authorities stepping up prosecutions of children who left under-age in order to reinforce parents' acceptance of the new rule. Under the new LEAs, the policy was to monitor and record more effectively, but to proceed to prosecution less frequently. The use of cautions and 'warning' summonses (they were reviewed and many not proceeded with) also gradually reduced, but they continued to be used in significant numbers. Oxford School Board had been a prolific issuer of cautionary notices to parents, totalling 4,558 in the year before their demise. Under the succeeding LEA, notices averaged 600-800 per year from 1904-14, but summonses were much nearer the levels pursued by the School Board at or near 100 per year. In Bradford, the LEA took up where the School Board left off, issuing approximately 600 summonses a year, though this declined over the decade to 251 in 1913-14.<sup>422</sup>

By 1900, it was difficult for any parent to avoid enrolling their child at school (though there were specific groups, such as travellers, who were able to) – the critical problem was now to raise the average level of attendance of the majority of elementary school children and reduce the impact of occasional absenteeism by a significant minority.<sup>423</sup> To make significant improvements in attendance, the authorities, and schools themselves, needed to improve the attendance of the mass of children who were already enrolled and

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<sup>421</sup> BuCC *Bucks CC Att. Cttee.* 11.1.1910, 7.3.1911.

<sup>422</sup> OSB *Report 1892-1902*; Oxford City Council OCCEC *Education Committee Annual Reports 1904-14*; BradSB *Triennial Reports 1890-1903*; Bradford City Council Education Committee BradEC *Annual Reports 1905-14*.

<sup>423</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1900*, xix vol.I (328), p.98 shows 95.4% of children aged 5-13 were enrolled in school – 97.8% for those aged 7-11.

at school most of the time. They realised that the relatively small number of families involved in long-term non-attendance were difficult and expensive to deal with. Instead it made sense to pay attention to improving the attendance of children with occasional or intermittent non-attendance, perhaps due to parents' domestic requirements, holidays or occasional 'skiving' on their own part. Increasing the child's desire to be at school and cajoling the broadly co-operative parent along the right lines had a better chance of success. The new LEAs therefore invested in reward schemes for good attendance, many of which persisted into the 1920s and 30s. Attendance medals had been awarded from the 1880s by the larger school boards, but with the LEAs came a remarkable flowering of positive incentives to be regular at school – a proliferation of medals, rewards, book vouchers, flags, photographs, treats, and even half-day holidays as rewards for those children who reached high levels of average annual attendance.<sup>424</sup> Elementary schools were in this respect following the example of Sunday schools, which had always had to offer more 'attractions' to draw in children. One Buckinghamshire School had all the children with the best attendance photographed as a group and each child was given a print of the photograph. For working-class children of the time, it was both an unusual and highly-motivating prize, which would act as a visible reminder of the achievement on the family mantelpiece and a talking point for the proud parents.<sup>425</sup> Oxfordshire County Council promised a silver watch to any school leaver with five years' perfect attendance and good conduct. This was a valuable prize and between April 1908 and December 1911, they handed out 363 watches to model attenders.<sup>426</sup> Setting up an individual competition between pupils was not always the best way to motivate the whole school and induced some children to attend when they were too ill to do so. Hastings LEA stopped giving medals and individual prizes in 1906, replacing them with class and

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<sup>424</sup> Both Buckinghamshire and Hastings gave a half- or whole day holiday reward for schools reaching their required % attendance. BuSAC *Bucks Minutes* 12.7.1904; HaECSAC *Hastings SAC* 20.7.1914. Hastings also had a New Zealand flag which circulated to the school with the best quarterly attendance – an interesting mix of attendance and Empire, it was still travelling round the Hastings schools in the 1920s. HaECSAC *Hastings SAC* 20.4.1909, 12.4.1920.

<sup>425</sup> BuCC *Bucks CC Att. Cttee.* 12.9.1911; it also fitted in well with traditional working-class displays of status – see Paul Johnson, *Saving and Spending: The Working-Class Economy in Britain 1870-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp.228-9.

<sup>426</sup> Oxfordshire LEA Education Committee OLEA *Quarterly Reports of the Elementary Sub-Committee* 30.9.1908, 31.12.1911.

school rewards.<sup>427</sup> It was a strategy wholly appropriate if one wished to raise the average attendance of the majority of children. Friendly competition between classes, or even schools, boosted average rates of attendance across the board, even if the minority of persistent non-attenders were counted in the whole. The policy fitted well with the emphasis on competitive team games in this period, and the wider concern for competitiveness in the economy and national fitness, which informed curricular concerns at the Board of Education.<sup>428</sup>

Did general spending on buildings and more qualified teachers help improve attendance? This is difficult to assess. There is some evidence for the ‘school effect’ in terms of influence over children’s attendance – schools could make a difference as one recent study has shown, but small differences in the social make-up of a school could also lead to its having better resources such as additional books or more trips.<sup>429</sup> A decline in subscriptions and voluntary contributions in rural areas had affected smaller church schools greatly in the 1880s and 1890s, with less investment in buildings and repairs. In urban areas, the gap between board schools and voluntary ones widened considerably. The older buildings of church schools often suffered by comparison with new large and well-equipped board schools, supported more generously (at least in the eyes of their critics) from the rates. Many school boards invested in expansion and new building in the 1890s via loans based on future rating income, which the church could not match. The pressure on subscriptions to voluntary schools and the threat of a gradual attrition of church schools transferring to the local school board was certainly one of the motivations for Conservative support for the 1902 Act.<sup>430</sup> Most towns had acquired a school board by the turn of the century, as the inadequacies of voluntary provision became apparent. Occasionally, as in York, town councils found their hand was forced by the closure of voluntary schools, in anticipation of a better-funded situation under a school board.<sup>431</sup>

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<sup>427</sup> Hastings Borough Council HaEC *Education Committee Minutes Vols. 1-8* Vol.3 28.11.1906.

<sup>428</sup> Stephen Heathorn, *For Home, Country and Race: Constructing Gender, Class and Englishness in the Elementary School, 1880-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), p.27

<sup>429</sup> Rehana Yasmin, "Shared or Different: The Elementary Experiences of Working-Class Girls in Birmingham Board Schools at the End of the Nineteenth Century" (unpublished BA thesis, University of Birmingham, 2007), pp.48-52.

<sup>430</sup> Daghish, *Educational Policy-Making*, p.5.

<sup>431</sup> YSAC *Mins*. Quarterly reports 8.8.1887 and 3.10.1887.

The introduction of the guarantee of free elementary school places from September 1891 also put pressure on urban local authorities to provide new places where church schools were unwilling entirely to abandon fees.<sup>432</sup>

In their 1900 Report, the new Board of Education reviewed its predecessor's investment in buildings since 1870, delivering an additional four and half million school places over the 30 year period. They estimated that voluntary schools had been built to a cost of £11million without state support. Loans to school boards approved by the Department totalled nearly £39½ million, but nearly half of this amount was accounted for in the final decade of the century. After 1893, there was an additional £100,000 to 9 school boards for special schools for blind or deaf children.<sup>433</sup> Yet the initial surveys of their estates showed the new LEAs the dire state of many elementary school buildings they had inherited. In West Yorkshire, nearly half of the elementary schools had 'midden-privy closets' and about the same proportion no gas or electric light.<sup>434</sup> There are many examples of complaints from parents about the state of buildings, especially the children's toilets (or 'services'), as insanitary conditions were not only off-putting but likely to cause sickness, and they were all too common in the large one-room school buildings common in rural areas.<sup>435</sup>

The investment by LEAs before 1914 in new buildings, and to better and healthier designs, dwarfed that of the earlier school boards and church societies, but their effects can hardly have been felt before the improvements in attendance from 1903-6. If there was a school effect on attendance, it must have been generated by improvements initiated in the 1890s.<sup>436</sup> The numbers and proportion of qualified elementary schoolteachers were also improving greatly in this period with an increase of 16,506 certificated teachers between 1902 and 1906, representing a 24% increase in their numbers, though they were still only 57% of the adult teacher workforce. The teacher-pupil ratio had been rising

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<sup>432</sup> Ibid. 2.9.1892.

<sup>433</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1900*, xix (328), p.97.

<sup>434</sup> Gosden and Sharp, *West Riding*, p.54.

<sup>435</sup> BuCC Bucks CC Att. Cttee. 14.9.1909 – the parent in this case was prosecuted for keeping his child at home.

<sup>436</sup> M. Seaborne and Roy Lowe, *The English School: Its Architecture and Organisation Vol. 2 1870-1970* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p.63.

since the 1880s and by 1906, there were 36 children for every adult teacher, though class sizes varied considerably between schools.<sup>437</sup>

The new local education authorities seem to have given attendance monitoring a ‘shake-up’ in terms of organisation and resources, which may well have produced the quick results noticed in the figures for 1903-5. Yet these improvements were sustained and built upon gradually in the years which followed. This suggests that the efficiency of enforcement continued to have an effect, but it also allows for the influence of longer-term investments in elementary schooling, designed to increase its positive attraction to parents and children. Investment in schooling was not the end of the story, however, as the duties of local education authorities were broadened by legislation relating to child welfare, most of which was delivered via schools.

If measures specifically intended to improve attendance were reaping results and conditions in schools were gradually becoming more welcoming, did the welfare measures introduced after 1906 have any positive impact on attendance? The two key reforms affecting children in elementary schools were the 1906 Education (Provision of Meals) Act and the 1907 Education (Administrative Provisions) Act. These two acts have been lauded as together forming ‘the most important single (sic) weapon... for improving nutrition and combating malnutrition.’<sup>438</sup> Logic suggests that meals at school would be a positive inducement to attend and the promotion of health and child welfare generally would enable children to avoid infection and other diseases of malnutrition likely to keep them off school. However, the provision of meals to children was both limited in coverage and intermittent. There were limitations on what LEAs could do under the law, for instance the ceiling on rate support for school meals before 1914, but there were also limitations on what LEAs *wanted* to do, which reflected the long shadow of COS attitudes towards welfare and worries about the potential costs of straying beyond the education remit. Concerns about national physical efficiency had influenced the

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<sup>437</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1908*, xxvi (3862), p.41.

<sup>438</sup> Bernard Harris, *The Health of the Schoolchild: A History of the School Medical Service in England and Wales* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995), p.120.

legislation, but in practice the effects were limited by the ways in which local authorities implemented it.<sup>439</sup>

### **School feeding and its impact on attendance**

If childhood poverty was a major cause of poor attendance at school, then the provision of school feeding should have made an impact on attendance. The Departmental Committee of 1913 clearly thought this was the case.<sup>440</sup> The guarantee of a meal either at the start of the school day or in the middle of it could be seen as a positive inducement, a lesson not lost on those keen to improve attendance at school in modern-day developing countries.<sup>441</sup> The provision of school meals was already a common practice where charitable organisations had set up feeding stations for needy children, notably in parts of London and in Bradford, under the aegis of the Cinderella Club. These charitable feeding schemes were usually highly organized and included the screening of families by school managers or school board members.<sup>442</sup> However, widespread, continuing and organised provision was the exception – in most places, feeding of schoolchildren occurred on an adhoc basis in response to unusual circumstances, such as trade depressions or strikes.<sup>443</sup> The Education (Provision of Meals) Act enabled local authorities to provide the equipment and premises for school feeding but not the cost of the meal, which was supposed to be recovered by charging the parent. Where medical assessment judged the child in need of feeding and parents were assessed as not able to pay, then free meals were given, but the situation for each family was reviewed on a regular basis. This meant that many children were not fed on a long-term basis, nor could LEAs provide meals during holidays or at week-ends. The permissive nature of the Act meant that the effects

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<sup>439</sup> Pamela Horn, *The Victorian and Edwardian Schoolchild* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1989), p.85.

<sup>440</sup> See opening comment to this chapter.

<sup>441</sup> Cheryl Vince-Whitman et al., "School Health and Nutrition", (Report of the World Education Forum, Dakar, Senegal 26-28 April 2000: Unesco, Paris, 2001), pp.11-12.

<sup>442</sup> Martin, *Women and Schooling*, p.123-5; Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class*, p.111; John Burnett, "The Rise and Decline of School Meals in Britain, 1860-1990", in John Burnett and Derek J. Oddy (eds.), *The Origins and Development of Food Policies in Europe* (London: Leicester University Press, 1994), pp.57-60.

<sup>443</sup> E.g. "Altofts Log Book." 8.9.1893.

were patchy as some authorities introduced systematic school feeding, others employed it on a temporary basis or in winter only, while some provided none at all.<sup>444</sup>

From 1907-9 approximately 58,000 children were receiving meals in London, affecting 5 out of 6 elementary schools. In 1911, the London County Council provided free meals for up to 50,000 children in the winter and 26,000 in the summer from a population of 780,000.<sup>445</sup> If one expected to see an effect on attendance of regular school feeding, the best place to look for it would be in London. In fact, London's elementary school attendance rates did improve significantly from 1902-1909 after a decade of near-static figures in the 1890s. Between 1894 and 1901, average attendance had increased by only 1.5%. In the succeeding eight years, it rose by just over 8%. However, the LCC's school meals provision could not have had much of an effect before the 1907-8 school year, although some effect may have come from charitable provision. Instead, the improvements in school attendance after 1901 may have owed something to the decision of the London School Board to strengthen its attendance department in 1901 so that all children with less than 80% attendance could be visited.<sup>446</sup> Even LEAs which were progressive in other respects did not see the need for substantial school feeding on the rates. For instance, in 1911, Birmingham LEA fed breakfasts to 5,182 children (4.4% of its average school attendance numbers) with an average of 62 meals per child over the year. No dinners were provided in Birmingham. Given the standard 'school year' consisted of 200-225 days, the provision does not represent a programme of regular feeding for the city's needy schoolchildren.<sup>447</sup> However, in Birmingham's case, the local authority may have considered the extensive charity dinners provided to be adequate and even preferable to a publicly-funded provision.<sup>448</sup> The most generous provision outside London occurred in Bradford and Shipley, Northampton, Nottingham and York. It is possible that the publication of Rowntree's survey had done something to spur the local authority and voluntary agencies to provide for the needy children in York. The provision

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<sup>444</sup> There is no evidence of any school feeding up to 1914 in most rural areas. Hastings provided breakfast for approximately 4% of its schoolchildren in the winter months only.

<sup>445</sup> Rose, *Erosion of Childhood*, p.156.

<sup>446</sup> Maclure, *London Education*, p.38.

<sup>447</sup> Sandler, "Adolescents in Birmingham", pp.81-2.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, p.84.

of meals in rural areas was negligible – in Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire (and in the city of Oxford itself) there was no provision for school feeding by the LEA before 1914. Thus, by 1913-14, only about 10% of elementary schoolchildren were receiving school meals in the whole of England and Wales and this only on an intermittent basis.<sup>449</sup> It is unlikely that feeding of children on this scale would have had a significant effect on school attendance overall but there may have been an effect for particular schools where meals were provided consistently and long-term to the poorest children.

### **Hastings and Bradford – a case study**

It still seems sensible to suggest a link between the provision of school meals and attendance at the very local level even if the provision was insufficient to make a discernible impact on average attendance rates across a particular town or county. It was well understood by school managers and teachers that poor attendance was often linked to poverty and sickness and they were likely to be linked to malnutrition amongst children. Despite this, outside the capital, local authorities were both slow to act and guarded over the commitment they made to feeding under-nourished children. In Hastings a campaign by labour organisations failed to move the Council to agree to provide for anything other than a very basic breakfast of oats and skimmed milk and that only for temporary periods and for a very small number of children. The earlier legislation which had obliged children to collect meal tickets from the Poor Law Relieving Officer had had minimal impact. In Hastings only 10 children were in receipt of food relief by February 1907.<sup>450</sup> Yet family poverty was a serious problem in this small seaside town and there were constant complaints from schools about attendance problems related to excessive child employment outside school hours.<sup>451</sup> In October 1907, a Boot and Shoe Fund was established as a result of the Council's enquiry into low attendance at some of its schools. An annual distribution of clothing by a charitable trust triggered an exodus from the elementary schools, forcing the closure of two for the day

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<sup>449</sup> Rose, *Erosion of Childhood*, p.157.

<sup>450</sup> HaECSAC *Hastings SAC* Vol. 1 18.2.1907.

<sup>451</sup> Robert Tressell, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (London: Paladin, Grafton Books, 1991), pp.317-22.

and three more for half the day of the distribution.<sup>452</sup> In November, 1907, headteachers were asked to supply lists of children they considered in need of feeding with the result that 340 children were identified. This was still only 3.9% of the total elementary school population of 8,700 children. The Education Committee was so slow to react to the 1906 Act that school managers and even the local branch of the Charity Organisation Society intervened to urge them to make provision for school feeding.<sup>453</sup> In December 1907, the LEA received a letter from the Trades and Labour Council asking for immediate action. Due to a technicality the Committee was able to refuse to see a deputation of the Hastings branch of the ILP in support of school meals during its December meeting.<sup>454</sup> Meanwhile a special committee set up to report on underfed children recommended the adoption of the Act. Still the Council hesitated – the issue of school feeding was so politically-charged that two members asked for a written record to be entered in the minutes of how each member had voted. There followed a series of letters from the Trades Council, the local ILP and SDF to the Education Committee pressing the case due to the high level of unemployment in the town over the winter. The Hastings economy was based largely on the tourist trade and agriculture, both sectors characterised by low wages and seasonal employment. Eventually, the SDF called a mass meeting in February 1908 to protest about the very limited provision in the town. Four feeding centres were involved, all church halls and parish rooms offered by local clergy. The Council even borrowed the 300 bowls and spoons used by the children, rather than buy them. At the end of March, they called a halt to the school meals and provoked a protest from the SDF, but this was completely ignored.<sup>455</sup> Dissension over school feeding revived in the autumn of 1908, but nothing was done to improve the quality of the breakfasts or extend the supply of meals before the outbreak of War. Yet Hastings was by no means the worst provider of school meals amongst the smaller county boroughs.<sup>456</sup> It would be very surprising if such a limited response were to have any significant effect on attendance in Hastings. The average attendance for the quarter ended December 1907, before feeding started, was

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<sup>452</sup> HaECSAC *Hastings SAC* Vol. 1 20.2.1905.

<sup>453</sup> HaEC *Hastings Ed. Cttee.* Vol. 3 13.11.1907.

<sup>454</sup> Tressell, *Philanthropists*, pp.346-7 appear to refer to this specific incident.

<sup>455</sup> HaEC *Hastings Ed. Cttee.* 29.4.1908.

<sup>456</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1912-13*, XXI (6116), Table III, p.323 – for instance Blackpool and Brighton provided proportionately fewer meals per child in attendance.

86.9%. Attendance for the January to March quarter in 1908 was only 82.1%, showing the usual winter decline associated with greater incidence of sickness and weather-related absences. There is no evidence that school breakfasts had made any impact on attendance in the town's schools as a whole.

In contrast to Hastings, Bradford was one of the most progressive authorities in the country when it came to child welfare and clearly in the vanguard over the provision of school meals. In its review of the arrangements for setting up their Central Cooking Depot, Bradford City Council acknowledged the inadequacy of previous charitable provision. They also argued that the half-penny rate allowed by the 1906 Act was insufficient to meet the needs of under-fed children in the city. Bradford had the best school meals provision of any town or city outside London, with an average of 167 meals per child in 1912 and 11% of its average attendance numbers being fed. However, given the levels of attendance in Bradford, it represented only 6% of the total numbers on roll. However, the quality of premises and meals provided were superior to those in many towns. Bradford provided both breakfasts and dinners from a Central Cooking Depot which had been specially equipped by the LEA to distribute hot food to more than a dozen dining rooms across the city, and they also continued meals through the Christmas holiday. The Education Committee saw this as an opportunity not only to meet physical needs, but to inculcate good habits in the children, so teachers and monitors had been instructed to 'make the meals a method of educating them (the children)', that is, in table manners.<sup>457</sup>

Bradford Education Committee had invested more than any other town in improving child nutrition, yet there was a definite limit to the commitment the City Council was willing to make. In 1908, they received a deputation of the unemployed in the city asking for 3 meals a day for the children of fathers out of work. Previously the Council had tried to limit meals to those children assessed by the Medical Officer as requiring feeding due to long-term poverty or malnutrition. In this case, they responded to what they saw as a temporary crisis by providing breakfasts, but once done, they conceded that 'it seems

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<sup>457</sup> BradEC *Bradford Ed. Cttee. Annual Reports, 1906-7*, p.45.

extremely doubtful whether the giving of this meal can ever be discontinued in a number of cases without inflicting great hardship on the children.’<sup>458</sup> Only two schools had permanent dining rooms constructed; the rest had temporary or rented premises. In 1913, the Canteen Sub-Committee said it saw no need for further permanent dining rooms.<sup>459</sup> This indicates clearly that even in Bradford, school meals were seen not as a welfare measure for all children, but a means of additional, and often temporary, support to the poorest families. Numbers receiving free meals fluctuated and children were frequently removed from the list when family circumstances were deemed to have improved. The number of cases considered varied little in the years leading up to World War I at approximately 3,000 a year and 80-85% of these were granted free meals. The exception was 1911-12 which coincided with a coal strike and continuing sluggish performance of the Bradford textile industry, when 4,645 children were given free meals.<sup>460</sup> However, the sustained feeding of a core number of children, the poorest of Bradford’s pupils, should have helped to improve attendance. After the introduction of school feeding, more than 200 Bradford teachers were surveyed to check on the outcomes. They agreed that the meals had improved children’s attention in class as well as their conduct and manners.<sup>461</sup> However, they were not asked to comment on the impact of school meals on attendance.

The impact of school feeding, even though it probably affected 5-10% of children in elementary schools at different times, was not perceptible at the city level in the attendance figures. The reasons for this lie both with the limitations of the feeding programme and the endemic problems of school attendance in the City’s schools. Attendance in Bradford was low by any comparison. The average attendance rate had reached 80% in the late 1890s, and then stuck at 82-3% in the succeeding years. Bradford also had severe problems with childhood infections, often affecting the very poorest and weakest children who should have been a priority for feeding, but were instead often absent due to illness.<sup>462</sup> Infant mortality was still very high in parts of Bradford in the early twentieth century, partly due to insanitary housing arrangements.

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<sup>458</sup> Ibid., 1908-9 p.54.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid., 1913-14 p.66.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., 1908-9 p.54.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid., 1908-9 p.56.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid., 1908-9 p.54.

For those who survived into childhood, damp and insanitary conditions must have increased susceptibility to sickness.<sup>463</sup> Unfortunately, no attendance data for individual schools has survived, so it is not possible to test the impact of school meals on attendance in the poorest districts. However, whatever impact there was must have been masked by other widespread causes of non-attendance in the school population beyond those connected with children's health and nutritional status. Of these, the lack of stability in the local population probably ranked the highest in terms of its effect on school attendance. In their report on the house to house visitation during spring 1906, the Bradford attendance officers noted that out of 29,614 families visited, 8,283 or nearly 30%, had moved house at least once in the previous 12 months.<sup>464</sup> This level of mobility, involving both migration in and out of the city, as well as frequent moves within it, was likely to disrupt learning as well as schools' ability to trace children. Population mobility on this scale is a sign both of endemic poverty and the instability of the local labour market. The School Medical Officer estimated that at least 5,000 children out of the 35,000 in the City's elementary schools had poor or very poor clothing.<sup>465</sup> Bradford's economy relied almost uniquely amongst the West Riding towns, on its narrow textile specialism of worsted production. Low wages and high levels of female employment were a characteristic feature, as well as low levels of unionisation in the city's factories.<sup>466</sup>

The other significant obstacle to pushing up attendance rates in Bradford after 1900 was the rise in the numbers of half-timers at the city's schools. The Education Committee thought that school feeding would reduce the number of half-timers in Bradford, which far exceeded those in other West Yorkshire towns.<sup>467</sup> In this hope they were to be disappointed as after a brief decline near the turn of the century to below 2,000, the number of half-timers actually rose to 4,327 in 1903 and stayed at or slightly above that

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<sup>463</sup> Thompson, "Infant Mortality", p.141-2 refers to the predominance of privy middens in up to 75% of Bradford's housing and the scarcity of domestic water supplies in the city before 1914.

<sup>464</sup> BradEC *Bradford Ed. Cttee. Annual Reports*, 1906-7 p.38.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*, 1911-12 p.9.

<sup>466</sup> B.L. Hutchins, *Women in Modern Industry (1915)* (Wakefield: EP Publishing Limited, 1978), p.116; Pressley, "Half-Time in Bradford", p.18.

<sup>467</sup> *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Partial Exemption from School Attendance*, quoted in Pressley, "Half-Time in Bradford", p.12.

level until 1916.<sup>468</sup> This was partly a product of new bye-laws introduced by the Bradford School Board in 1902, whereby children were no longer able to gain full exemption from school at age 13 on the basis of attendance alone. Instead, they had to pass the Labour Certificate Examination at Standard VII. But they could still go half-time at age 12 on the basis of their attendance. Whereas many parents would sacrifice a year's income on the promise of full-time work at 13, few were willing to wait until 14, so half-time grew in popularity.<sup>469</sup> Local authority bye-laws could have a critical effect on the patterns of attendance of working-class children, for better or worse, but their room to steer communities in what they saw as a progressive direction was always circumscribed by local pressures, both political and cultural.<sup>470</sup>

### **Health and hygiene in the elementary school – the impact on attendance**

After 1907, the state was no longer simply policing attendance at school – it was policing cleanliness, hygiene, infection and child health. Local authorities engaged with families over many more issues, instructing and encouraging, where before they had simply required the child to be in school under threat of prosecution if the parent failed to fulfil the statutory duty. The 1907 Education (Administrative Provisions) Act made the appointment of a school medical officer mandatory and required the medical inspection of elementary schoolchildren on entry, at age 7 and at age 11. However, there was no compulsory provision of treatment for children diagnosed as needing it, though some urban authorities did establish clinics to treat the common childhood ailments, including dental and optical services. Most did not, nor did they provide subsidies for poor families to enable them to obtain the recommended treatment – though some such as Buckinghamshire did. Treatment was provided from 1912 onwards and parents were asked to contribute about half the cost, which averaged between 1s and 1s 6d.<sup>471</sup> But more usually, the poorest children went untreated as a result of poverty or sometimes as a result simply of a lack of understanding between the health professional and a sceptical

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<sup>468</sup> Ibid., Appendix A.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid., p.10.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid., p.15.

<sup>471</sup> Buckinghamshire County Council BuCC *Elementary Education Sub-Committee Reports* 24.4.1919, p.14.

parent. The comments of the School Medical Officer in Oxford illustrate this gap in understanding, ‘Only too often, the parents are quite satisfied to let things go on as they are (especially if the remedy would involve any trouble to themselves), refusing to believe that there is anything wrong, saying that it is of no importance, or declaring that they will not have their children ‘experimented upon.’<sup>472</sup>

There were several contrary and perhaps unintended effects of increased interest in children’s health on their attendance at school – one was the proliferation of medical certificates covering long-term absences, another was the much greater use of school closure to combat epidemic infections and a third was the exclusion of children who attended school in a dirty condition or who were infested with lice, nits or other infectious diseases such as ringworm.

It was perhaps a sign of increased affluence amongst parents that the use of doctors’ certificates to cover school absences increased in the early twentieth century. Although medical certificates were sometimes produced by parents in court before 1900, this had tended to be a route open only to the better-off. However, the apparent readiness of doctors to write medical notes on parental demand caused increasing frustration to LEAs.<sup>473</sup> Writing in his 1939 Handbook for Attendance Officers, John Stevenson warned of the easily-persuaded doctor who was willing to sanction an indeterminate absence, but he cautioned attendance officers to be tactful in challenging doctors in court.<sup>474</sup> The description of a child as ‘delicate’ was difficult for a school or local authority to challenge, but they were on stronger ground for a court prosecution when parents of a girl with several months absence from school covered by medical certificates applied for a labour certificate for her to start work.<sup>475</sup>

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<sup>472</sup> OCCEC Oxford Ed. Cttee. *Report of the Medical Officer of Health 1910*, p.38; Richard Wall and Jay Winter, (eds.), *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.102.

<sup>473</sup> HaECSAC *Hastings SAC* 25.5.1903.

<sup>474</sup> John Stevenson and J. Henry Capen, *Handbook for School Attendance Officers*, 2nd edn. (London: Pitman, 1939), p.101.

<sup>475</sup> Buckinghamshire County Council BuCC *School Attendance Assistant Committee Minutes* 6.5.1919.

A second effect of the introduction of medical expertise into schools was a much greater concern about the spread of childhood epidemic diseases, leading authorities to close schools for sometimes as long as 3 or 4 weeks at a time on the medical officer's recommendation. The strategy of closing schools was initially designed to establish a 'fire-break' in an epidemic when attendance levels had fallen typically below 70%. In 1907, Buckinghamshire LEA introduced a formalised system for school closures and the exclusion of children and pupil teachers from infected homes, via an application to the medical officer of health once attendance had fallen to 66%. Schools were closed for a minimum of 3 weeks.<sup>476</sup>

	March		April		May		June		Sept.		Oct.		Nov./Dec.		Jan.		Feb.	
	Sch	Dys	Sch	Dys	Sch	Dys	Sch	Dys	Sch	Dys	Sch	Dys	Sch	Dys	Sch	Dys	Sch	Dys
MOH	1	14	3	43			2	36					2	11				
SMO	10	222	16	289	8	109	10	143	2	52	3	80	6	131	10	131	8	115

TABLE G

Source: Buckinghamshire County Council Reports of the Elementary Education Committee May 1911-March 1912. SCH = Number of schools closed; DYS = Total days closed; MOH = schools closed under order of Medical Officer of Health; SMO = schools closed by or with approval of the School Medical Officer

Table G above sets out the school closures in one typical year, 1911-12, in Buckinghamshire. In March 1911, the LEA's monthly report noted 'an epidemic of measles, scarlet fever, whooping cough and influenza is more or less prevalent over the whole of the County.'<sup>477</sup> The rate of closure had slowed by the autumn, but then revived in the winter. As it was a rural county, many of the schools concerned would have been small but the disruption was evidently substantial. Infant schools were affected more by epidemic infections; closure of an infant school also reduced the attendance of older girls as parents withdrew them to care for younger siblings. Ironically, this was at a time when the mortality rates and incidence of childhood diseases was declining. The exception was measles, which continued to sweep through schools in regular epidemics into the 1920s and 30s.<sup>478</sup> Authorities argued that since school closure was a public health measure designed to safeguard the education of the children in the longer term, they should not be

<sup>476</sup> BuCC Bucks CC Att. Cttee. 7.5.1907 - there was no incentive for school staff to precipitate a closure as they could be redeployed to other schools for the duration of the shut-down.

<sup>477</sup> BuCC Elementary Education Sub-Committee Reports 18.5.1911.

<sup>478</sup> Anne Hardy, "Rickets and the Rest: Child-Care, Diet and the Infectious Children's Diseases, 1850-1914", *Social History of Medicine* 5 (1992), p.410.

penalised by losing all the attendances of the children while the school was closed. Once the Board of Education had conceded this principle, by allowing them not to count these days within total annual school days for attendance purposes, the practice of closing schools during epidemics of measles, scarlet fever and mumps, etc. not surprisingly increased.<sup>479</sup> For instance, Leicestershire LEA had 22 schools (8.7% of its total) closed at some point during 1903 due to infectious diseases and this was one of the better years on record. In 1904, the number increased, with closures for scarlet fever, measles, whooping cough, smallpox, mumps, rubella, chickenpox, diphtheria and inflammatory throat diseases or a combination of these. Epidemic diseases were monitored much more systematically under LEAs than previously, and their incidence recorded against dips in attendance averages. Leicestershire LEA assumed 5% of lost attendances were due to infectious disease, not including those kept at home due to contact with infected family members.<sup>480</sup> However, the actual numbers of sick children must have been fewer than in earlier decades of compulsory schooling as the incidence of the main infectious diseases had declined by 1900.<sup>481</sup> In addition school buildings were less likely to be vehicles of infection than in the 1870s and 80s when the hazards of poor ventilation and lack of sanitation were first highlighted as sources of the rapid spread of epidemic infections. However, the closure of schools and the imposition of quarantine exclusions may have disrupted schooling for more children after 1903 than in earlier periods. The practice of excluding children at risk of infection would also have allowed an opportunity for some to take time off school when not ill under the cloak of 'risk of infection' without too many questions being asked. The stricter enforcement of quarantine was also a response to parental concern over the spread of infection. This was not necessarily a class-based issue – there was little difference between middle-class and working-class areas in the incidence of measles, the most virulent infectious disease affecting children in the early twentieth century, although the longer term outcome for a poorly-nourished child might be worse.<sup>482</sup> Coventry LEA kept detailed records of children diagnosed with ringworm,

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<sup>479</sup> This change in the recording of school closure for epidemics must have 'improved' attendance rates overall when first introduced.

<sup>480</sup> LeCountAC *Mins.* 3.12.1904.

<sup>481</sup> Anne Hardy, *The Epidemic Streets: Infectious Disease and the Rise of Preventive Medicine 1855-1900* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p.3

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.43-8.

diphtheria, measles and fever, as well as other infectious diseases during the period 1912-22. In 1909-10, a total of 319 children had been excluded long-term from Coventry's schools due to ringworm, some of them for more than a year and the Attendance Committee discussed setting up a special class isolated from other children on condition that parents paid a shilling for treatment first.<sup>483</sup> The rate of infection of all childhood diseases in Coventry was on average 2.2% of the school population and totals more than 39,000 reported cases over the decade. Beside this, they noted the number of absentees for 'illegal' reasons as only 42 over the same period.<sup>484</sup>

Nearly as much absence was caused by the exclusion of children considered a potential health hazard due to lice, nits, ringworm and other conditions associated with hygiene. The implementation of legislation for medical inspection and cleansing of 'verminous' children was placed in the hands of new professional groups, such as nurses and health visitors. Their contact with families and schools began to create a different relationship than the policing role of the attendance officers in the years before the First World War.<sup>485</sup> Although school log books show that the mingling of dirty and lice-ridden children in with the elementary school population had been a concern for teachers in the poorest areas since compulsion was introduced, it did not capture the attention of local authorities to any extent before medical inspection was introduced.<sup>486</sup> The 'cleansing' of schoolchildren was one of the most obvious outcomes of the monitoring of child health in schools, reinforced by Section 12 of the Children Act of 1908, which gave the local authority the right to inspect children's clothes and bodies for infestation. The labelling of children who were in a dirty condition or had head-lice or nits and the cleansing treatments, which sometimes included cutting hair off, stigmatised such children and set them apart from the rest. School nurses began a campaign to enforce standards of cleanliness in classrooms and by proxy in working-class homes. Children who were judged by medical staff as 'dirty' or 'verminous' were usually excluded if parents were not able to send them to school lice-free. In persistent cases, where parents returned

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<sup>483</sup> Coventry LEA CovLEA *School Attendance Sub-Committee Minute Book* 4.5.1910, 29.3.1911.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid. data for all years, 1912-22.

<sup>485</sup> Nikolas Rose, *The Psychological Complex: Psychology, Politics and Society in England, 1869-1939* (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1985), p.151.

<sup>486</sup> Horn, *Schoolchild*, pp.79-80.

children to school still infested, they were repeatedly excluded but also prosecuted for non-attendance.<sup>487</sup> Some authorities invested in facilities for compulsory cleansing of children's hair, bodies and clothing, whereas others simply sent a letter home warning that the child must be returned to school treated and cleansed of head lice and nits.<sup>488</sup> In Oxford, Nurse Martin was praised by the Attendance Committee for her 'tactful way of dealing with cases (which) saved much friction and unpleasantness with parents.' Her successor was not so tactful as it was reported she 'commenced a very vigorous work... concentrating her attack ... on several very bad school districts.'<sup>489</sup> The Medical Officer for Oxford estimated in 1912 that nearly half of the girls had head lice, much more than for boys due to their longer hair. But things were improving, 'they are beginning to realize that lice and nits are undesirable in the case of a day-girl (i.e. non-resident servant) or nursemaid.' The leavers' medical exam was used as an opportunity to require girls to get rid of head lice, but he thought some girls put off getting a job until 14 rather than comply.<sup>490</sup> Although medical staff were usually the prime movers in pursuing cleanliness, some of the impetus came from parents who were more alert to infection risks and wanted their 'clean' children to remain out of contact with dirty or infested classmates. Teachers were also much more active in giving the cleanliness message in the classroom, and local authorities regularly sent circulars home to parents urging them to keep children's hair free of lice. This was not necessarily welcomed by parents – some were prepared to move their children to a different school rather than have the teachers give them a lecture on cleanliness.<sup>491</sup>

In rural areas too, local authorities were compelled to act. In Oxfordshire, the exclusion of children with verminous heads and infectious diseases by the School Medical Officer added to absence rates at rural schools with average attendance for spring 1910 dropping nearly 4% from the level before inspections had been established.<sup>492</sup> Resistance to the ministrations of the School Medical Assistants, nurses and health visitors in the main,

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<sup>487</sup> BuCC *Bucks CC Att. Cttee.* 12.11.1907,7.2.1911.

<sup>488</sup> CovLEA *School Attendance Sub-Committee Minute Book* 31.5.1911 Coventry re-established its cleansing centre when exclusions failed to get parents to cleanse their children.

<sup>489</sup> OCCEC *Oxford Ed. Cttee. Annual Reports* 1912, pp.19-20.

<sup>490</sup> *Ibid.* 1912, p.39.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.* 1912, p.40.

<sup>492</sup> OLEA *Quarterly Reports of the Elementary Sub-Committee* 30.6.1910.

was considered a real risk and the local authority made provision to prosecute any parents who assaulted or abused them.<sup>493</sup> Whereas parents often complained about the difficulty of keeping children clean while attending school, the Medical Officer noticed a decline in standards of cleanliness on the children's return to school after the holidays, an implicit criticism of the home and parental standards.<sup>494</sup>

Although children could be cleansed at school, this took no account of conditions at home and the capacity of the mother to maintain the levels of cleanliness and vigilance required to keep her children free from dirt and infestation. In 1907, Leicester City Council informed the Sanitary Committee they were 'taking active measures to cure the dirty and verminous condition in which many scholars are sent to school – but that the condition of the homes of such scholars makes it very difficult to make permanent improvement...', in the hope that more might be done to address the prime causes of childhood infestation.<sup>495</sup> They went on to use prosecutions of parents for non-attendance where children had been excluded for their dirty condition to highlight what they thought was the responsibility of the Sanitary Committee, 'it being frequently found that after being properly cleansed they relapse into their former dirty state owing to unsatisfactory domestic surroundings.'<sup>496</sup>

Similarly, as a result of the 1908 Children Act, local education authorities were in a better position to act in relation to neglected or abused children, whose condition was investigated by attendance officers following absences from school. Sometimes they involved the NSPCC, but often their remedy was to remove the children to an industrial school, as in the case of one family in Aylesbury who were reported to the Buckinghamshire LEA by a neighbour. The parent had been prosecuted three times over non-attendance without improvement.<sup>497</sup>

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<sup>493</sup> Ibid. 31.12.1910.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid. 31.12.1911.

<sup>495</sup> Leicester City Council School Attendance Committee LeCCSAC *Minutes* 29.1.1907.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid. 1.12.1912.

<sup>497</sup> Buckinghamshire County Council Local Education Authority BuLEA *Education Committee Minutes* 7.2.1905, 11.1.1910, 10.10.1911.

The promotion of health and cleanliness itself drove a dividing line between such children and their families and the rest, between the mass of working-class children and a minority who were seen as either uncared for, neglected, in moral danger or requiring special treatment. This focus on the health of the child and the 'deficiencies' of the family diverted the attention of attendance committees away from simply monitoring percentages and agreeing on prosecutions and forced them to consider children's absences in a wider light – even if that meant more intrusion into the family than previously.<sup>498</sup> Opinions differ about the reaction of parents to such intrusion and expectations, yet the majority did take on board the strictures on health and cleanliness, even if in the poorest housing, they were totally unrealistic. It was a process which separated the rough and the respectable even more sharply than before at school, including those in rural areas, where the identification of 'dirty and neglected children' marked them out from equally poor children from homes where mothers attempted to observe the standards of cleanliness expected.<sup>499</sup>

### **Day industrial schools and the decline of truancy**

Changes in attitudes towards truancy mirrored those in relation to other children's needs – the switch from the punitive to the remedial, though the transition was fraught with moral judgements and the fear that parental responsibilities would be undermined. However, ways of dealing with truanting children had already begun to change within the institutional and legal framework available in the 1890s. Day industrial schools had always been situated between the ordinary public elementary school and the residential school, providing both a punitive and remedial answer to truancy in the local area. They were controversial to the extent that the truant was enabled to stay in the family home, whereas many school boards preferred to remove children from the home environment in order to effect a complete break with past influences. By 1913, only 12 day industrial schools remained in operation.<sup>500</sup> This was despite regular endorsement of their work by the Home Office Inspector, Colonel Inglis. In 1896, the Departmental Committee on

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<sup>498</sup> Behlmer, *Friends of the Family*, p.101.

<sup>499</sup> Davin, *Growing Up*, p.217.

<sup>500</sup> Harris, "Day Industrial Schools", p.295.

Reformatory and Industrial Schools commended them, saying, 'We have nothing but praise to give to these institutions.'<sup>501</sup> However, their summary of the role of day industrial schools at the end of the nineteenth century contains many sentiments which give an insight into the reasons for their demise. In 1896, there were 23 schools providing for 3,000-4,000 children all told. They catered for children up to the age of 14, yet the Committee saw their target group as younger elementary school children, and particularly recommended that the headteachers should be women, 'as more suitable than men to have the care of young children, especially young children of this neglected class.' They preferred the maintenance of the tie to home, the provision of food and cleansing of children and the fact that they were 'treated on a system of kindness'.<sup>502</sup> Whether this was an entirely accurate picture of discipline in all day industrial schools is uncertain, but the emphasis had certainly changed from the 1870s, when school boards had originally established them. The Oxford School Board established its day industrial school as a deterrent to both parents and children, with a quick turnover of inmates, returning reformed truants quickly to their elementary schools as a warning to others. Attendance in day industrial schools was considerably better than in ordinary elementary schools, and the provision of food and clothing may have had something to do with it, though parental opposition tended to spring from the fact that maintenance contributions were relatively high compared with school fees. By the 1890s, many of the pupils of the day industrial schools stayed there for several years at a time, because the authorities believed that they would not be cared for adequately at home. The Committee confirmed this view, 'They (the children) come from homes where they are completely neglected, and ... it is unreasonable to expect that children of their age will attend the public elementary school; ... and if they do they will, from their dirty and neglected condition, be an offence to the other children.'<sup>503</sup>

The Committee of 1896, as much as the Committee of 1913 quoted at the start of this chapter, believed that day industrial schools performed a welfare function by providing food, clothing and cleansing of a group of children separated from the rest by their degree

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<sup>501</sup> *Parliamentary Papers. 1896, Report on Reformatory and Industrial Schools*, p.25.

<sup>502</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>503</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

of poverty. The 1913 Report with its dismissal of the role of such schools, reflects the changes in government policy which although imperfectly implemented at that date, intended that children who needed nothing more than a good meal need not be excluded from the normal elementary school. The separation out of these dirty, rough or malnourished children into the day industrial schools was replaced by a universal approach to health and welfare via the work of the School Medical service to ensure all elementary school children were inspected and their health monitored. The Committee of 1896 did not foresee the responsibility being broadened out and new powers created for local authorities – hence they expressed the hope that more day industrial schools should be established, by making one elementary school in every town an industrial school, so that more children could benefit from the material help available in them.<sup>504</sup> Despite this, the Committee of 1913 can be seen as the linear successor to the Committee of 1896. Already the ideas about treatment of the neglected and the truant were coming together in a view that truancy itself was merely, almost inevitably, the result of extreme poverty and neglectful parents and therefore responses to it should be remedial rather than punitive.

Why did so many of these schools close between 1900 and 1914? A number of factors operated against the continuation of this form of local segregated schooling of truant, as is illustrated in the case of Oxford. The local education authority closed the day industrial school it had inherited from the Oxford School Board on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1905. The school buildings were old and the expectations of the Home Office were that provision would reflect the wider-ranging curriculum which was being introduced into elementary schools at the time, as well as the better-quality buildings which LEAs sought to provide for their schools. The school therefore needed investment and this was not a priority. Oxford had a shortage of elementary school accommodation and needed to provide a special school to meet its legal obligations and avoid spending on residential education elsewhere. The site of the day industrial school seemed ideal, as they could not afford to lose an existing elementary school. The superintendent of the day industrial school and his wife were re-employed at the special school to oversee the buildings. The Education Committee commented on its closure,

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<sup>504</sup> Ibid., p.26.

During the 26 years of its existence (the school) has been a valuable help in dealing with truants and others. Improved conditions have, however, rendered it possible to deal in other ways with this comparatively small class of children, and the need of a Day Industrial School has apparently ceased.<sup>505</sup>

The reference to ‘improved conditions’ predates the main child welfare legislation and in Oxford, there was still substantial poverty and especially poor-quality housing in 1912.<sup>506</sup> It is possible that the main motivation for closure was the financial one, but the sentiments offered also reflect a growing belief that social conditions rather than family influences lay at the root of many of the truancy issues with which the education committee dealt.

### **The impact of the 1908 Children Act on the treatment of truancy**

Most local authorities did not have a day industrial school available, and many, including the London School Board, preferred residential institutions which removed children from the ‘contamination’ of their homes and street influences. However, the introduction of the Children Act reflected a new way of viewing those children whose circumstances or behaviour drew them into the orbit of the justice system. New ways of viewing the minority of children who had committed crimes or were seen to be in danger of doing so, also affected the way truancy was dealt with by the courts. Dissatisfaction had built up with the arrangements for trial and sentencing of children and young people in adult courts. Eventually this led to the 1908 Children’s Act, which set up a completely separate system of juvenile courts and introduced probation, the aim of which was to keep the juvenile offender at home in the family environment where possible, but it also allowed the court to deal with children who had not committed an offence, but were considered due to their family circumstances, to be at risk of doing so. A line had been crossed and the gradual merging of provision for criminal children and those simply neglected or at risk paradoxically brought more children within the remit of the judicial system. The process of justice for children underwent a major change in the period after 1908 – character reformation gradually took priority over punishment. Sandler has called it a

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<sup>505</sup> OCCEC *Oxford Ed. Cttee.* 31.10.1905.

<sup>506</sup> Butler, *Social Conditions*, chap. 5.

‘double-edged reform’, undertaken in the name of protection and understanding of children and juveniles, but also enabling more control and supervision of their lives.<sup>507</sup> The progressive impact of this change, fuelled by psychological theory and child study, can be seen in the establishment of Borstals, in the Children’s Act of 1933 and the Criminal Justice Act of 1948.<sup>508</sup>

Before 1908, the easiest way to have a child who had not actually committed an offence sent away from its family to a residential school, whether an industrial school or a truant school, was via Section 12 of the 1876 Education Act. After the 1908 Children Act, children were sent to residential institutions often for longer periods, on the assumption that this was a remedial action which needed time to take effect, rather than a punishment which needed to be timed to reflect the seriousness of the crime.<sup>509</sup> More children were apprehended by the police under the ‘liberal’ conditions of the Act, which allowed the detention of juveniles if neglected or in danger of delinquency, as well as for crime. But the boys picked up by the police were often also known for truanting – the connection between crime and being out of school was well attested by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>510</sup> The children sent away under the Children Act had sometimes committed offences but not been charged, but they could also be committed for being neglected or cruelly treated. Local education authorities were forced to take on the costs of children committed by the police under the Children Act as well as those committed for truancy under the Education Acts.

It has been claimed that the decline of committals for truancy and a rise of committals under the Children Act means that truancy had ceased to be a problem.<sup>511</sup> However, the situation is not so simple, as children had never been sent to industrial or even truant

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<sup>507</sup> Sandler, "Adolescents in Birmingham", p.367.

<sup>508</sup> Victor Bailey, *Delinquency and Citizenship: Reclaiming the Young Offender, 1914-1948* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p.4; Heather Shore and Pamela Cox, (eds.), *Becoming Delinquent: British and European Youth, 1650-1950* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p.10.

<sup>509</sup> Alexander Paterson, *Across the Bridges: Or, Life by the South London River-Side* (London: Edward Arnold, 1911), p.125.

<sup>510</sup> The enforcement of compulsory schooling was held up as the answer to juvenile crime – see, for example, BradSB *Triennial Reports 1895-7*.

<sup>511</sup> Oberwittler, "Correctional Education", p.33.

schools for 'mere truancy'. Most of the children committed under the 1876 Education Act to industrial and truant schools for persistent truancy had other factors in their background which influenced the committal, such as an inadequate home or drunken parents, destitution, begging or neglect. Some were 'beyond control' of their parents, so were either delinquents or seen to be at risk of becoming one. The 1876 Act provided a convenient legal method of removing them from 'evil surroundings' at home or on the street.<sup>512</sup> These were always a minority of the children whose parents were prosecuted for non-attendance before 1900.<sup>513</sup> After 1900, prosecutions of parents for non-attendance, though fewer in number, still included some committals to the industrial or truant school and even in 1911, after the Children Act, 40% of committals to industrial schools were for offences under the Education Acts, usually breaches of Attendance Orders.<sup>514</sup> It is possible that the same type of child was being sent to residential correctional institutions after 1908, but on the basis not of his truancy but under the 1908 Act for other factors which placed him at risk. For truancy and other types of anti-social or delinquent behaviour were often linked – the use of one piece of legislation or another to achieve a penal objective is a matter of choice and availability to the prosecuting authorities.

Part of the reason for the decline in committals for truancy was growing disillusionment with the school board truant schools, highlighted by poor publicity over several scandals and trenchant criticisms by the Committee of 1896.<sup>515</sup> There were none for girls, it being deemed an unsuitable environment – the regime was one of extreme regimentation and (sometimes brutal) discipline, as well as stultifying monotony in all aspects, including the food and accommodation. The truant school had been designed as a short-term 'shock' to the truant, so that he would be returned to his elementary school suitably cowed by his experience. In practice, as the Committee reported, the schools contained a majority of boys who were on their second, third or even more frequent stay. The Committee of 1896 reflected on this in their report, 'It remains to be explained how it is that boys who have once experienced this severe treatment come to incur it again. The explanation is that in

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<sup>512</sup> Ibid. p.26 note 14.

<sup>513</sup> CoSB, "Coventry Summons Book" - only 36 out of 3,000 cases resulted in committal to industrial or truant school.

<sup>514</sup> Rose, *Erosion of Childhood*, p.90.

<sup>515</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1896, Report on Reformatory and Industrial Schools*, p.23.

most cases they cannot help themselves. They are children completely neglected by their parents; and (they)... simply cannot go to school unless they are helped.<sup>516</sup>

Rates of committals to truant or industrial schools had always varied enormously and the children came overwhelmingly from urban areas. For many local authorities, the decision to commit children to a particular residential institution rested mostly on cost, proximity and availability of places, since children had to travel escorted by an attendance officer. In Hastings, for instance, it was usual for all children committed by the magistrates for truancy to go to Purley Lodge Truant School in Brighton. The Education Committee monitored the attendance of boys released on licence and regularly revoked it, if attendance slipped at all.<sup>517</sup> Some of these cases were of children who had been neglected or abandoned when the parent went in the workhouse.<sup>518</sup>

A local authority which owned a truant school was torn between the need to maintain a building and fill it with paying 'customers' and the declining demand for such institutions as a response to truancy. In 1904, Brighton Education Committee asked Hastings if they could guarantee to fill a fixed number of beds in their truant school, but Hastings were unwilling to commit themselves to send truants on a regular basis, preferring to secure a fine of the parents if possible. The following year, Brighton closed its truant school, announcing that 'truancy has been stamped out in the town through the operation of the school' – they also saw no future need for the expense of maintaining it.<sup>519</sup> The Hastings LEA continued to send boys to truant schools, relocating them to London, where competitive rates were offered plus the cost of transferring the child, as London also sought to keep its institutions afloat.<sup>520</sup> Opinions about residential industrial schools were more positive than for truant schools and these tended to be private institutions, which school boards and then local education authorities could patronise without an ongoing commitment to the fabric. Committals of truants to industrial schools by magistrates at the behest of local education authorities also fell in the decade up to 1914.

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<sup>516</sup> Ibid., p.23.

<sup>517</sup> HaECSAC *Hastings SAC* 11.5.1903, 25.5.1903, 16.11.1903.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid. 13.6.1904, 13.12.1909.

<sup>519</sup> Ibid. 7.11.1904, 18.9.1905.

<sup>520</sup> Ibid. 9.4.1906, 20.4.1909.

However, the impression that fewer truanting children were actually being sent to residential institutions should be qualified. The impact of the 1908 Act was to enable the police to bring prosecutions against a greater number of juveniles, and although the use of probation meant that supervision in the community was a possibility, the numbers going to residential institutions actually increased in the period up to and including the First World War.<sup>521</sup> In Birmingham, there had been a decline in occupancy of the Shustoke Industrial School so that by 1906, only 136 boys were in residence and the LEA was able to offer places to boys from other towns. The total number of Birmingham children in industrial schools in 1907 was 233. However, from 1908 the number of children committed by magistrates in Birmingham rose and the Education Committee was forced to distribute them to industrial schools further away. By November 1913, 427 Birmingham children were in industrial schools, 159 at Shustoke, 46 at Harborne School, 15 at the Sandwell School for the mentally-deficient, and the rest elsewhere.<sup>522</sup> In Bradford, the numbers of boys and girls committed to industrial schools rose steadily from 45 in 1909 to reach a peak of 92 in 1918. Even in 1920, the number committed had only fallen to 79.<sup>523</sup>

Criticism of residential correctional schools had started even before 1900, but before 1914, there was still a belief at the Board of Education and at local authority level in the character-reforming capacity of such schools, particularly industrial schools, which were thought to have a less punitive regime. At the same moment that the Departmental Committee of 1913 published its damning verdict on truant schools, a less publicised Report by the Board of Education on practical work in secondary schools provided evidence of the reformatory achievements of the Desford Industrial School in Leicester for the 272 boys admitted from 1903-9. The Headmaster claimed 84% had been successful in finding employment after leaving the school and, although the school was obliged to keep in contact with them for 3 years after leaving at 15, a large number remained in contact for much longer. The Headmaster spoke proudly of the academic

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<sup>521</sup> Oberwittler, "Correctional Education", p.33 graph.

<sup>522</sup> Charles A. Vince, *History of the Corporation of Birmingham*, vol. IV (Birmingham: Cornish Brothers, 1923), pp.312-5.

<sup>523</sup> BradEC *Bradford Ed. Cttee. Annual Reports*, 1909-20.

progress made by boys, most of whom had only reached standard 1 on entry, when on average they were already 10 or 11. His words echoed the belief predominant in the nineteenth century that a child's character could be shaped by an educational environment, with 'good and sufficient food, regular discipline and continual supervision, a constant atmosphere of education appealing to them at almost every hour..., recreative evenings with lantern lectures, singing and private reading, separation from undesirable parents and surroundings and the influence of the streets.'<sup>524</sup> He recognised the stigma which often attached to boys seeking employment from an industrial school – most of them went on farms or in the navy or army, often as bandsmen, but he believed that they were infinitely better placed than if they had remained with their families. There was still an argument to be won about the benefits and costs of institutionalising children, though it was no longer on the basis of their truancy that most of them were sent away from home.

### **Was truancy still a problem in 1914?**

Between 1900 and 1914, elementary schools became much more the focus for middle-class attention – on the one hand, they were a useful means of 'civilising' their working-class neighbours, both children and parents, but they also provoked feelings of envy. The new LEAs, especially in the bigger towns, were seen as extravagant spendthrifts at the ratepayers' expense, providing for free what the middle classes had to pay for and creating an incentive for working-class indolence.<sup>525</sup> Some of the better-resourced council schools offered a wider curriculum and better teaching than many private day schools patronised by the lower middle classes. The social hierarchy reflected in elementary school provision was most evident in London and other metropolitan areas, where more resources were available and segregated housing created a relatively privileged intake for particular schools. The education offered by such schools was valued by aspirational working-class (usually artisan) parents, for whom the prospect of a

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<sup>524</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1913, Evidence Given to the Consultative Committee on Practical Work in Secondary Schools*, xx (6838), p.572.

<sup>525</sup> Philip Waller, "Altercation over Civil Society: The Bitter Cry of the Edwardian Middle Classes", in Jose Harris (ed.), *Civil Society in British History: Ideas, Identities, Institutions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.128.

scholarship to secondary school was an attainable goal for their children. In the majority of towns and in rural areas, elementary schooling was less ambitious and distinctions within school were mainly between the poor and very poor or between children from respectable and rough homes, both of which might lie in the same street. Most elementary schoolboys were destined for manual labour and elementary schoolgirls for a few years of unskilled work, followed by marriage, motherhood and a lifetime of scrimping to meet family needs. The value of schooling, beyond the basic skills which could be mastered by most children by age 11 or 12, were therefore seen as of little relevance to the rest of the children's lives.<sup>526</sup> But regular attendance had now become the norm in working-class communities – indeed, they felt the right to criticise the school if it failed to provide a relevant education for their children.<sup>527</sup> Active resistance to schooling was restricted to certain isolated groups, such as travellers and canal boat families, where lifestyles and economic survival cut across the state's requirement. The change of policy, away from prosecution and towards positive incentives to attend school, helped undermine antipathy and promote inclusion. The interventions in family life to promote child welfare and the Children Act, which some working-class leaders saw as class legislation, reinforced the image of schools as an 'imposed' institution, but at the same time, the wider curriculum, better buildings and resources of the council school promoted the value of education, particularly the love of reading, and this generated the opposite attitude amongst some parents.<sup>528</sup>

Anna Davin has referred to the 'civilising' influence of school on the rough children of the East End slum, alongside the spreading of working-class respectability and more settled patterns of household life.<sup>529</sup> Not all schools offered cultural contrasts to their local neighbourhood – many of the better-off working-class homes were the epitome of respectability, order and cleanliness – but for the poorest children from overcrowded and damp slums, the orderliness of the classroom, the habits of cleanliness and punctuality and the formality of school staff would offer an alternative cultural pattern to home life.

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<sup>526</sup> Reynolds, Woolley, and Woolley, *Seems So!* p.43.

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.*, p.40.

<sup>528</sup> Rose, *Intellectual Life*, pp.87-91.

<sup>529</sup> Davin, *Growing Up*, pp.216-7; Heathorn, *Home, Country and Race*, pp.28-31; Paterson, *Bridges*, p.66.

For reformers such as Margaret McMillan, the Camp School was an object lesson planted in the heart of the Deptford slums to convince and educate parents and children alike.<sup>530</sup> In such areas, the familiar patterns of absenteeism from school were perpetuated into the twentieth century – especially the retention of girls at home to mind babies or nurse sick siblings. Most LEAs did little about this, but nonetheless, the concern for the education of girls, especially in their future roles as mothers, together with general anxieties about infant mortality rates, did lead a few lone middle-class female members of education committees to propose the setting up of crèches as a way of responding to the needs of families with working mothers.<sup>531</sup> Attendance in rural areas was still affected by family needs and continued tolerance extended to absence ‘once or twice a week’ which had pertained under many rural school boards and attendance committees.<sup>532</sup> Magistrates continued to refuse to convict in cases where children were kept at home one or two half-days a week.<sup>533</sup>

Truancy - wilful absence from school, whether condoned by parents or not – was still the main focus for regular monitoring by attendance officers, yet subtle changes were taking place in the reasons for absences where there was no question of neglect, cruelty or extreme poverty. Sunday School trips, family holidays and the enjoyment of funfairs were much more a feature of children’s lives than twenty years earlier, although children had always taken time off school for traditional local events – such as the Honley Feast near Huddersfield or York Races.<sup>534</sup> In towns and cities, the variety of diversions for children and parents increased those truanting for leisure or a holiday in addition to traditional ‘holiday’ activities, such as hop picking in the south of England. In Hastings, hop picking had a major effect on school attendance each autumn. Such was the extent of working-class participation from the poorer parts of the town, the Education Committee gave up on efforts to resist it and instead asked certain schools to declare additional holidays.<sup>535</sup> Increasingly amusements and outings were designed specifically to attract

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<sup>530</sup> Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class*, p.91.

<sup>531</sup> HaECSAC *Hastings SAC* 19.1.1914; OCCEC *Oxford Ed. Cttee. Annual Report*, 1912, p.14.

<sup>532</sup> BuCC *Bucks CC Att. Cttee.* 10.10.1911.

<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.* 7.3.1911.

<sup>534</sup> YSAC *Mins.* 28.9.1891; HuSAC *Minutes* 18.9.1888.

<sup>535</sup> HaECSAC *Hastings SAC* 21.9.1908, 18.7.1910, 19.9.1910.

families and children. Buckinghamshire Education Committee, though concerned about children taking time off for 'Society excursions' with their parents in school term, were reluctant to prosecute as magistrates were usually unwilling to treat this as unreasonable absence.<sup>536</sup> A survey of absences by Buckinghamshire County Council for July 1911 showed the considerable effect of Sunday School treats and carnivals – a total of 6,521 absences were recorded in schools in Slough on 19<sup>th</sup> July, the day of the Co-operative Society Carnival.<sup>537</sup>

The enthusiasm of children to break out of school to enjoy a brief respite is no surprise and the attitude of many poor parents was to 'make hay while the sun shines' and take advantage of the increasing provision of outings and entertainments provided for children by youth organisations.<sup>538</sup> It was entirely in keeping with the supposed working-class 'fecklessness' of which middle-class commentators complained.<sup>539</sup> Attitudes of parents were no less conditional towards their children's schooling and the transition to work. Although children were attending school more regularly between the ages of 5 and 12, indeed perhaps because they did so, parents resisted attempts to increase the leaving age to 13 or 14. In Bradford, as we have seen, parents frustrated the attempt of the School Board and later LEA to keep children in school full-time to age 14. In 1904, Buckinghamshire Education Committee advised the County Council not to adopt the Board of Education's model bye-laws which increased the standards of attainment required for part or full-time exemption at age 12. They thought it more realistic in the countryside to have a lower standard to qualify for exemption from school attendance compared with that pertaining in towns. This was partly due to their difficulty in merging the great variety of bye-laws in place in rural parishes, often with minimal requirements with regard to early leaving. They also recognised that parents and indeed employers would only accept gradual change in the extension of compulsory schooling to children aged 12 and over.<sup>540</sup> There was known to be opposition amongst farmers towards

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<sup>536</sup> BuCC *Bucks CC Att. Cttee.* 11.9.1906.

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.* 12.9.1911.

<sup>538</sup> Gillis, "Evolution of Juvenile Delinquency", p.114.

<sup>539</sup> Johnson, *Saving and Spending*, p.218.

<sup>540</sup> BuCC *Bucks CC Att. Cttee.* 21.1.1904.

extending the elementary education of their labourers' children.<sup>541</sup> In 1905, Buckinghamshire made the conviction of parents who withdrew their children to send them to work without LEA consent a priority in order to make it clear they were not willing to allow rural communities to ignore the law.<sup>542</sup> Intermittent absences of boys engaging in seasonal labour were still an irritant to attendance departments but permission for schools to extend the summer holiday and then take time off the Christmas break was one way in which Buckinghamshire LEA did continue to accommodate family needs.<sup>543</sup> At the same time, the practice of keeping older girls at home to care for younger siblings or help with household tasks was discouraged, though temporary exemptions from school for girls continued to be granted when there was sickness or some particular crisis in the family.<sup>544</sup> The contentious areas were now not over long-term absences of boys employed on farms or girls kept at home full-time in defiance of the law; parents seem to have largely accepted the requirement for a certain level of acceptable attendance from age 5 to 12. Disputes occurred 'at the margins', over the poor attendance of children approaching school leaving age, or where parents had arranged employment on the expectation of the early leaving exemption being granted. After 1902, Education Committees started to tighten up on what constituted 'beneficial and necessary employment', since most bye-laws included this as a criteria for the local authority granting of exemption from school attendance. Most leavers claimed their right to leave early not via exam performance, but by means of having attended 350 sessions every year for the previous five years – in effect, the law allowed parents and children to trade off the extension of their education for more regular attendance from age 7 to 12. The labour certificate was still only refused in a tiny minority of cases, where the LEA suspected the child did not have a job to go to or where attendance beforehand had been very poor.<sup>545</sup>

Children's labour while still at school, both in the towns and the countryside, was increasingly concentrated into jobs before and after school, and in the holidays and often in specialised roles – for instance, newspaper selling, street trading and shop-delivery

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<sup>541</sup> Horn, *Rural England*, p.269.

<sup>542</sup> BuCC Bucks CC Att. Cttee. 7.2.1905.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid. 11.9.1907.

<sup>544</sup> Ibid. 12.12.1905.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid. 10.10.1905, 9.10.1906.

work.<sup>546</sup> The changing patterns of employment for boys in urban areas reflected the shift in the British economy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries towards the commercial and retail sectors. But even in the countryside, the type of employment available, both legally and illegally to children at school, reflected the spread of middle-class affluence. The illegal employment of boys for beating game was increasingly reported by education committees as a matter of concern, as well as their roles as caddies for golfers and even as ball boys at a tennis tournament.<sup>547</sup> The Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on the Employment of School Children highlighted the excessive hours of children employed out of school.<sup>548</sup> However, the legislative outcome, the 1903 Children's Employment Act, was permissive and little was done to restrict child labour outside school hours. In Birmingham in 1914, the city council found that over 2,500 children worked 10-20 hours per week, over 2,000 worked 20-30 hours and over 1,700 worked from 30-40 hours, over 500 worked for over 40 hours and nearly 70 children worked over 50 hours per week – all in addition to school attendance.<sup>549</sup> Moral 'concern' was frequently voiced by education committees, especially about the vulnerability of children involved in street trading, which was seen as akin to begging. Girls involved were seen to be particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Street trading under the age of 11 was banned and licensing of youths aged 11-16 introduced but enforcement was not easy. The rhetoric of elected councillors may have pleased their middle-class respectable voters, but they also recognised the problems and costs of enforcement when such part-time jobs were so common amongst working-class boys.

By 1914, attendance rates were vastly improved over the levels thirty years earlier, but the general attitude of parents seems to have been one of pragmatic compliance, an acceptance that the state had a claim to one's children for a period, after which their earning power could be rightly claimed by the family. There is no evidence in this period, that there was any decline in the expectation that working class children would leave school at the earliest opportunity in order to contribute to the household income.

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<sup>546</sup> Ibid. 10.11.1903.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid. 8.12.1908; CovLEA *School Attendance Sub-Committee Minute Book* 1.8.1906.

<sup>548</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1902, Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Employment of School Children*, xxv (849), pp.268-9.

<sup>549</sup> Sandler, "Adolescents in Birmingham", p.105.

Perceptions of economic need were unlikely to change in a period when working-class incomes on average were just about matching the rise in prices and insecurity of employment grew, especially for unskilled and semi-skilled workers.<sup>550</sup> Analysis of early leavers from Leicestershire from 1912-20 shows that the number gaining exemption on the basis of achieving Standards V or VI was minute compared to the vast majority who left at 13 on the basis of attendance. Early leaving in Leicestershire only declined significantly in 1920, with the implementation of a standard leaving age of 14 with no exemptions allowed.<sup>551</sup>

## **Conclusions**

Was the period 1900-14 a 'golden age' for school attendance? Levels of school attendance were impressive given the high incidence, compared with today, of infectious childhood diseases. School provision had improved and continued to do so through this period, but no great improvement in family incomes or lightening of the economic pressures on working-class families occurred. Conformity to the attendance laws was aided by legislation in the field of child employment and by the 'adulthood' of the labour market, but this does not fully explain the improvement in this period.

The period was characterised by a shift from punitive approaches to truancy and non-attendance towards more positive incentives to attend school, such as the provision of school meals and rewards for attendance, as well as tangible benefits such as school trips, a more active and practical curriculum, better school buildings and more qualified teachers. Yet the achievement of such widespread conformity to compulsory schooling should also be placed in the context of the social climate before the First World War, when social indicators seem to show that the British population was more deferential and conformist than at any previous or subsequent time in the nineteenth or twentieth

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<sup>550</sup> Gazeley, *Poverty*, p.16.

<sup>551</sup> LeCountAC *Leicestershire Exemptions*

centuries.<sup>552</sup> In the relatively stable working-class communities of Edwardian England, and even Wales, regular school attendance was seemingly by this time an unimpeachable norm of behaviour which the working classes did not question, even if they sometimes objected to the suitability of curriculum offered or the manner in which it was delivered.<sup>553</sup> One might reasonably suppose that the habit of school attendance had become deeply embedded in working-class family life, but the experience of the wartime years shows that cultures of respectability were not set in stone.

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<sup>552</sup> Harris, *Private Lives*, p.154; Heathorn, *Home, Country and Race*, p.31; however, 1911 was the year which saw the most serious episode of school strikes in England and Wales – see Dave Marson, *Children's Strikes in 1911* (Oxford: History Workshop Pamphlet 6, 1973).

<sup>553</sup> Reynolds, Woolley, and Woolley, *Seems So!*, pp.40-47.

Chapter 6 – A problem shelved or a problem solved? School Attendance and Truancy  
1914-22

**‘The natural desire of not a few children to be through with school restraints and to enter adult life was reinforced by the excitement of war time.’<sup>554</sup>**

### **Introduction**

There is plenty of evidence that wartime dislocations and economic changes had significant effects on family life in Britain between 1914-18.<sup>555</sup> However, if in 1914, the high levels of elementary school attendance lulled the authorities into believing that truancy was no longer a serious problem, then the War showed them that school attendance could not be taken for granted. John Hurt characterises the working-class family in the early twentieth century as reluctantly compliant with the school authorities. He sees non-attendance as a ‘submerged’ issue, which reappeared during wartime when the authorities slackened their control.<sup>556</sup> Stephen Humphries believes school was no better liked by working-class youth during and after the First World War than before it. He claims the quality of elementary education had improved very little, especially in the rural and poorer urban areas and access to secondary education was all but nonexistent except for a tiny minority.<sup>557</sup> The First World War marks an important period in which these views can be tested. Under the disruption of wartime, though not accompanied by the evacuations of twenty-five years later, did children’s school attendance suffer and if so, for what reasons?

The War had practical impacts on the resources available for schooling and also on the enforcement apparatus. But there were also changes in the ways non-attendance and the reasons for it were viewed by the authorities. This affected both their policies on

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<sup>554</sup> Irene O. Andrews, *Economic Effects of the War Upon Women and Children in Great Britain*, series edited by David Kinley, *Preliminary Economic Studies of the War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1918), p.143.

<sup>555</sup> Wall and Winter, (eds.), *Upheaval of War*, pp.10-35.

<sup>556</sup> Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, p.212.

<sup>557</sup> Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels?* p.55.

prosecution and the school-based systems for monitoring and reacting to non-attendance. Fears about juvenile delinquency rose towards the end of the War and in the immediate aftermath, there was a move by the Board of Education to promote organised youth activities in response to what was seen as the risk of increased crime by young people. This 'moral panic' linked into concerns about school attendance, particularly of older children, from 1916 onwards. Non-attendance at school which caused the most concern was linked to other forms of deviance or involvement with the juvenile court system. Whereas attitudes towards the child might have led to a softening of 'treatment' of the truant, fears of the incipient delinquency of the adolescent fed into an increased committal of children to residential institutions, whether for truancy or minor offences during the War.

The upheavals of the wartime economy drew many young boys, especially, into an early exit from school to work on the land. Adolescents were also attracted into comparatively well-paid but unskilled armaments work straight from school. These trends attracted the concern of both progressive and traditional policy makers. The possibility of thousands of unemployable young men on the job market in the immediate aftermath of the War helped push several strands of educational reform to prominence after 1916. The First World War also, in the manner of the Second, prompted Government to give more attention to expanding educational provision than it had done before the War. The raising of the school leaving age for all children to 14 and the ending of the half-time system were both proposals which had received support from within the Board of Education before the War, but without action on the part of the Government. The raising of the school leaving age and the proposal to set up continuation schools embodied in the Fisher Act of 1918 can be seen as a reaction to the juvenile employment (or 'boy labour') problem, although there was a mix of motivations behind it – from the need to boost science education to the aim of producing fitter soldiers in the future.

Although the continuation schools came to nothing, the impact of the Fisher Act of 1918 on attendance was highly beneficial. It settled at last the official leaving age for all children, without leaving room for exemptions (whether on the basis of attendance or

examination). However, it is a testimony to the weight of influence of the child labour lobby in Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire that the half-time system was given a stay of execution until 1921. No longer were some local authorities performing a delicate balancing act between official sanction and the demands of parents for early leaving certificates. By 1921, the certificates had finally been extinguished, although this did not of course end the arguments about how long a school career should last.

### **Truancy and wartime school attendance**

Between 1914 and 1918, the Board of Education ceased to collect national statistics on school attendance, 'owing to the depletion of staff and the reduction of statistical work'.<sup>558</sup> This suspension of statistical work indicates the low priority for Government of education in general and attendance in particular during the First World War. Local authorities, however, did continue to collect their own statistics of attendance and these show the effects of wartime on the attendance of children at elementary schools. Unlike the Second World War, there were no mass evacuations, of schools or children, but disruption to school and family life was still a serious hindrance to the continuation both of the usual social pressures for school attendance and of the official enforcement mechanisms which had raised average attendance to around 90% in elementary schools in the pre-war decade.

The figures collected by local education authorities represented in this study show that attendance levels were largely maintained in the first year of the war at close to the pre-war levels.

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<sup>558</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1916*, viii (8274), p.27.

TABLE H

Annual Average Attendance Levels during the First World War Compared						
	Hastings	Bradford	Oxford	Shrewsbury	Shropshire	Bucks
1913-14	89.46	83.74	89.7	No record	86.6	91.1
1914-15	87.41	84.03	89	87.27	85.6	88.3
1915-16	86.98	83.41	87.4	88.03	82.8	89.0
1916-17	85.57	82.79	88.1	88.62	83	88.9
1917-18	84.43	80.5	86.5	89.49	81.4	88.9
1918-19	85.31	78.76	85.1	88.04	No record	88.7

Note: The school years used by individual LEAs to measure annual attendance varied (to Dec., March or Sept.).

Sources: Hastings Borough Council Education Committee Minutes 1903-20; Bradford City Council Education Committee Annual Reports 1904-20; Oxford City Council Education Committee Annual Reports 1904-27; Shrewsbury Borough Council School Attendance Committee Annual Reports 1906-23; Buckinghamshire County Council Elementary Education Sub-Committee Reports 1911-21.

Table H shows how average school attendance levels declined during the War in a sample of urban and rural areas. Both town and countryside saw a fall of 2-4%, with further pressure in some places coming from the influenza epidemic from November 1918 onwards. Shropshire, a rural area, had lower initial levels of attendance but experienced a similar fall in attendance to the towns. The figures for Buckinghamshire were high by comparison before the War and dropped very little during it. In Oxford, average attendance levels, which had been maintained near 90% since the turn of the century, experienced slippage as the war progressed. In 1915-16, attendance fell to its lowest since 1904, which the Education Committee attributed to 'many causes, in addition to the abnormal state of disorganization existing in many homes through the War.'<sup>559</sup> Furthermore, warnings of air raids had reduced attendances of children fearful of venturing out to school the following morning.<sup>560</sup> Bradford schools were affected particularly badly by the influenza epidemic and attendance throughout 1919 was poor.<sup>561</sup>

However, the overall fall in attendance across the country was modest when one considers the improvements in school attendance gained since 1904. The consistency of the fall in school attendance tends to indicate some general effects of the War were responsible. Unpicking what these were and how they operated on children's attendance is by no means simple. There are a number of possible causes, which separately or

<sup>559</sup> OCCEC *Oxford Ed.Cttee. Annual Report*, 1916.

<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*, 1916.

<sup>561</sup> *BradEC Bradford Ed. Cttee. Annual Report*, 1919.

together may have influenced attendance levels. If one starts 'closest' to the issue, then the impact of wartime recruitment of personnel may have affected both the capacity of schools and of attendance departments to monitor attendance effectively and pick up on truancy and long-term absences. Child nutrition and health offers another possible explanation as wartime stringencies, particularly affecting the poorest families, or those of servicemen, may have increased children's susceptibility to infectious disease. Both of these would have taken some time to have an effect, since conscription of personnel did not start until 1916 and food shortages were particularly acute from 1916 onwards. Other avenues of explanation are more difficult to evaluate precisely, for instance, pressures on the working-class family, especially the absence of fathers at war and working mothers, which might both be supposed to have an effect on children's regularity at school. It was the unsupervised urban street child who had first brought the need for compulsion to the surface as a keen issue for campaigners on school attendance. Evidence of a rise in concerns about the working-class family and child delinquency, as well as a measurable rise in the committal of children to correctional institutions would suggest that some working-class mothers struggled to maintain family discipline during wartime conditions. Beyond this, there is the question of new work opportunities for children outside school. Several studies had highlighted the prevalence of children's work outside school before 1914 and it is possible, indeed probable, that wartime created the conditions for a rise in the unregulated employment of school-age children. All of these factors may have acted to reduce children's attendance at elementary school, though their impact would have differed depending on local and individual conditions.

Firstly, what evidence is there that there was a slackening of supervision by schools and attendance departments over elementary school attendance? Disruption included the requisitioning of schools for military purposes, the loss of teaching and other staff, including school attendance officers, and the loss of investment in facilities and resources which had been planned as part of continuing improvements to government grants pre-1914. Initially, there was an effort on the part of both the Board of Education and local authorities to continue 'business as usual', but school buildings were an early 'sacrifice' made to the war effort as many were turned over to military use and the children moved

to temporary premises, such as church halls or amalgamated into less space in the elementary school buildings which had not been requisitioned.<sup>562</sup> For instance, five small schools were closed in Buckinghamshire and their pupils redistributed to other village schools, whilst Aylesbury Council School was taken over by the military and the children moved to church halls. The Board of Education claimed these changes had minimal effect on children, but in Hertfordshire, at least, their impact seems to have been extensive.<sup>563</sup> At the same time, planned new buildings and improvements programmes were cut back by local authorities in anticipation of wartime stringencies and there were general cut-backs in resources for schools as well.<sup>564</sup> Added to this were the general effects of loss of staff, especially male teachers and school attendance officers. However, these effects were not evenly spread – for instance the effect was greater on secondary schools and handicraft centres which had a higher proportion of male staff. Conversely the education of infants was the preserve of female teachers and was less affected, although the amalgamation of classes in larger schools increased class sizes.<sup>565</sup> For a rural authority like Buckinghamshire, the problem of maintaining small schools where teachers had joined up was particularly acute, and the power which still remained with church schools for managing their own staff tended to increase the difficulty of negotiating amalgamations.<sup>566</sup> The War accelerated a trend noticeable in the pre-war decade for women teachers to increase as a proportion of the school workforce, despite the decline of the pupil teacher route into teaching and the increasing demand for a teaching qualification. Oxford City Council recruited the former teachers it had previously required to leave on marriage, on a temporary basis, to fill vacancies opened up by those who volunteered.<sup>567</sup> The following year, school staffing was cut back, though with some resistance from the church schools.<sup>568</sup> By 1916, with conscription in place, nearly half of the male elementary school teachers employed in Oxford pre-1914 had gone to war and

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<sup>562</sup> Gordon, Aldrich, and Dean, *Education and Policy*, p.34.

<sup>563</sup> David H. Parker, "'The Talent at Its Command': The First World War and the Vocational Aspect of Education, 1914-39", *History of Education Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (1995), pp.242-3.

<sup>564</sup> BuCC *Elementary Education Sub-Committee Reports* 19.11.1914, 16.9.1915, 21.10.1915.

<sup>565</sup> Gosden and Sharp, *West Riding*, p.58; OCCEC *Oxford Ed. Cttee. Annual Report*, 1917.

<sup>566</sup> BuCC *Elementary Education Sub-Committee Reports* 21.10.1915.

<sup>567</sup> OCCEC *Oxford Ed. Cttee. Annual Report*, 1914.

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*, 1915.

those remaining were either over military age or disqualified on health grounds.<sup>569</sup> The impact of military service on the ranks of school attendance officers was patchy. Buckinghamshire, where many appointments of younger full-time officers had been made by the new LEA in 1904, suffered much more loss of personnel to war service than Coventry or Oxford, where there was continuity of staffing since many of the officers were older and had been in the employ of the School Board. By 1917, Buckinghamshire was employing several female school attendance officers to cover the relatively high staff turnover in the school attendance department.<sup>570</sup> Some urban areas, such as Leicester and Bradford, were also badly affected by losses of school attendance staff.<sup>571</sup> As early as September 1914, Bradford City Council had had to appoint 7 new temporary attendance officers to maintain its complement of 30. They had rejected a proposal in 1913 to employ women as attendance officers, but wartime conditions persuaded them to interview female applicants, though not to appoint any.<sup>572</sup>

Despite this turbulence, there is evidence that monitoring of attendance and prosecutions of non-attenders were maintained during wartime and additional work was done to counter the attendance problems emerging from 1915 onwards. In 1917, the Hastings LEA instituted a detailed survey of the commonest causes of absence of schoolchildren in their area.<sup>573</sup> Following this they issued a circular to parents urging better attendance, and a further one was issued in 1918, after another trawl for more specific information from headteachers on irregular pupils.<sup>574</sup> The Hastings Elementary Education Sub-Committee resisted economising on the information gathered from schools, and also on their regular schedule of visits to check on the progress and welfare of children in the various institutions for the deaf or blind or those in correctional institutions.<sup>575</sup> In Buckinghamshire, despite a succession of temporary attendance officers, the level of visiting to homes and schools was maintained; the issue of warning notices increased through 1915, with a particular focus on illegal employment during school hours, though

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<sup>569</sup> *Ibid.*, 1916.

<sup>570</sup> *BuCC Bucks CC Att. Cttee.* 26.7.1917.

<sup>571</sup> *LeCCSAC Mins* 7.10.1915.

<sup>572</sup> *BradEC Bradford Ed. Cttee. Epitome of minutes* 27.10.1914.

<sup>573</sup> *HaECSAC Hastings SAC Vol.3* 12.3.1917.

<sup>574</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol.3 8.7.1918.

<sup>575</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol.3 7.2.1916, 19.4.1915, 13.3.1916.

prosecutions for this did not increase. The LEA was particularly keen on the prosecution of parents who persistently sent their children to school in a dirty or verminous condition – in the year ended 31 March 1915, they carried out 171 prosecutions, including 43 for dirty children.<sup>576</sup> The number of warnings to parents increased in 1915-16, especially in the summer months, when warning letters to employers also reached a new high as many more children were working on the land illegally during school hours. However, the number of summonses dropped – this may have been due to the increased unwillingness of local magistrates to support the local authority. In order to make the point, the Attendance Committee noted in its minutes a particularly blatant case of illegal employment by a farmer which had been dismissed by the High Wycombe magistrates.<sup>577</sup> In Oxford, visits were maintained at the pre-war level until 1918, but prosecutions did increase, with a higher number of fines, but this was still small compared with the school board era.<sup>578</sup> In Bradford summonses also continued at the pre-war level, which itself was much lower than for 1905-7. However, one noticeable trend was an increase in numbers of boys committed to industrial school, especially from 1915-16 onwards.<sup>579</sup> All of this evidence suggests that attendance monitoring, although under pressure during wartime, was maintained and even increased in response to the decline in attendance; indeed, it may have prevented attendance from declining more than it did.

The second possible explanation for a drop in school attendance relates to the health and welfare of children. The privations of wartime and in particular the effects on diet of shipping losses and blockades and the lack of labour on the land might have been expected to have led to a decline in the variety and quality of food available to working-class families. Lack of a balanced diet may have affected more working-class children than in the pre-war period, and thus pre-disposed them more to infection and absence from school. Alternatively, the full employment situation in many towns and the regular payment of servicemen's allowances to their families may have improved the diet of many of the poorest working-class children. Thus, the nutritional status of children during

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<sup>576</sup> BuCC *Elementary Education Sub-Committee Reports* 22.4.1915.

<sup>577</sup> *Ibid.* 21.10.1915.

<sup>578</sup> OCCEC *Oxford Ed. Cttee. Annual Reports*, 1915-18.

<sup>579</sup> BradEC *Bradford Ed. Cttee. Annual Reports* - statistics for 1914-20.

the First World War has been a subject of debate amongst historians.<sup>580</sup> The key evidence to support the view that children's nutrition actually improved during wartime has been the anthropometric data collected from school medical officers. The data showed some improvement in heights of school children during wartime, but this was not consistently observed in all parts of the country. Wall claims a combination of improved incomes for the poorest families and better child care and cleanliness together increased the prospects for good health amongst the poorest children, even if the impact of economic circumstances during wartime on working-class children as a whole was not consistently positive.<sup>581</sup> He points to the significant effect of regular wages on the diet and hence health of London school children and a consequent drop in demand for free school meals, since these were only provided for the poorest children. Even though the supply of meat and dairy produce declined during the War, so that the national diet became monotonous with a concentration on potatoes, margarine and bacon, this was still an improvement for very poor families, who had not had access to much meat or fat in their diet in the pre-war period.<sup>582</sup> It might be expected therefore that the attendance of children most vulnerable to sickness would have improved. On the other hand, it was thought that the striking impact of the influenza epidemic beginning in November 1918 reflected a depleted resistance to infection amongst children and adolescents, but Winter claims that the epidemic's virulence was *sui generis* and not related to the nutritional status of children at the time.<sup>583</sup>

The areas used in this study demonstrate evidence of the improvement in the overall levels of health of elementary schoolchildren and this is shown in both the rural and urban context. The Buckinghamshire data show a consistent decline in sickness absence from 1912-15, with a 37% fall in the number of children off sick and sessions missed in

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<sup>580</sup> Harris, *Health of the Schoolchild*, pp.84-7.

<sup>581</sup> Richard Wall, "English and German Families and the First World War, 1914-18", in Richard Wall and Jay Winter (eds.), *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp.47-51.

<sup>582</sup> P.E. Dewey, "Nutrition and Living Standards in Wartime Britain", in Richard Wall and Jay Winter (eds.), *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.209.

<sup>583</sup> Jay Winter, "Some Paradoxes of the First World War", in Richard Wall and Jay Winter (eds.), *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.23.

1915, compared with 1912. Sickness absences went back to 1912 levels in 1916, (coinciding with the worst winter of the War for food shortages) but fell back even lower than 1915 in 1917 and for most of 1918.<sup>584</sup> In Coventry, the fall in sickness absence was even more dramatic in the wartime period. Detailed records of long-term absences of all types of childhood infectious diseases were kept from 1912-22. These show that the rate of sickness was virtually the same for 1913 and 1914, with cases expressed as a proportion of the school roll at 21% and 22% respectively. Despite a rising school population, the proportion halved to 10% in 1915, with figures of 13%, 7% and 4% for the subsequent years. Only in early 1919 did the impact of the influenza epidemic start seriously to affect the figures.<sup>585</sup> In the case of Coventry, the buoyancy of the wartime munitions production must have boosted working-class family incomes, drawing into better-paid work even the least skilled and casual workers whose family incomes were the most precarious of all.<sup>586</sup>

The better health of children is also indicated by the pattern of school feeding during the First World War. In 1914, the Liberal Government lifted the rate restriction which had limited the money available to local authorities for funding free school meals, although local authorities were allowed to charge parents for meals, or demand a part-payment towards their cost. However, most parents applied hoping to qualify for free meals. In late 1914 and early 1915, unemployment increased and there was a concomitant increase in the numbers of children fed. For instance, in Bradford the number of applications for free school meals rose by almost three times in 1914-15, with nearly 80% of them approved. This reflects the swift contraction of the textile trade early in the War. Yet by 1915-16, government contracts for uniforms and other supplies for the armed services had massively increased employment opportunities in the worsted trade, particularly for women.<sup>587</sup> Provision of free meals in Bradford fell back to about half of the pre-war level, even though the level of income for families to qualify had been raised to reflect

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<sup>584</sup> BuCC *Elementary Education Sub-Committee Reports* 24.4.1919.

<sup>585</sup> CovLEA *School Attendance Sub-Committee Minute Book* 1912-22.

<sup>586</sup> D.W. Thoms and T. Donnelly, "Coventry's Industrial Economy, 1880-1980", in Bill Lancaster and Tony Mason (eds.), *Life and Labour in a Twentieth Century City: The Experience of Coventry* (Warwick: Cryfield Press, University of Warwick, 1987), pp.22-24.

<sup>587</sup> Andrews, *Economic Effects*, p.31.

inflation.<sup>588</sup> Although there was a slight increase in applications in 1916-17, the provision of free school meals continued to decline in Bradford. In the winter of 1914, a total of 6,853 children were being fed, but by the end of 1918, that number had fallen to 794.<sup>589</sup> The story was the same elsewhere – in Hastings, the school meals budget grew in 1914-5 and a slightly greater range of meals was provided, with lunches for a few and meals on Saturdays and in the Christmas holidays for children who were special cases recommended by the School Medical Officer. Yet the total number of meals provided fell the following year and the general provision of breakfast via the usual canteens was suspended in the winter of 1916-17. By this stage, out of a school roll of 7,500 children, the total number being fed was only 33, at a cost of £16 11s 2d.<sup>590</sup>

The combination of falling demand for free school meals and declining sickness rates seem to indicate an improvement in the health of children during the First World War in the places studied. Earlier it was shown also that levels of visiting and prosecutions were maintained by local authorities during the War so there was no less pressure on healthy children not to truant from school. Therefore one could expect to see a significant improvement in attendance at school during the wartime period. However, the figures show a consistent 2% drop in elementary school attendance for the period after 1915. Should we conclude then that the proportion of absence from elementary schools during the First World War due to truancy, or ‘wilful absence’, actually increased whilst better health counterbalanced this, producing only a modest fall in children’s attendance overall? Unfortunately, the data on sickness absence covers only those infectious diseases notified to attendance departments and it is not possible to evaluate a precise percentage effect on the attendance statistics. Neither is it possible to quantify the effect of increased surveillance by school attendance officers. However, their role seems to have been as a counterweight to other factors which were pushing down attendance at school in wartime much more than is revealed in local authority figures.

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<sup>588</sup> BradEC *Bradford Ed. Cttee. Annual Report*, 1915-16 pp.10-11.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*, 1910-20.

<sup>590</sup> HaEC *Hastings Ed. Cttee. Vol.7* 26.2.1915 – 27.4.1917.

## The family economy and the First World War

The pressures *not* to attend school during the War have been hinted at in the data already – they concern both the general effects on the household economy and family relations and the increased opportunities for child employment during wartime. Irene Andrews, surveying the effects of the War on the employment of children in 1918, believed there had been an increase in the general tendency of children to leave school at the earliest legal opportunity to work, as well as a relaxing of legal constraints on early leaving and an increase in children working illegally.<sup>591</sup>

The main cause of an improvement in living standards for the poorest families was the wartime labour market – in contrast to the whole of the period of industrialisation, the War created for the first time in living memory a sustained period of full employment. However, the impact of job opportunities on family incomes varied, depending on the particular circumstances of each family. The families of servicemen were sometimes worse off, especially those who volunteered early, since the War Office did not always get separation allowances paid efficiently to families.<sup>592</sup> However, the unemployed were the first to join up, and their families were inevitably better off when in receipt of the separation allowance. For some women, the regularity of the allowance payments provided the opportunity to give up the casual low-paid work by which they had supplemented the insufficient or intermittent wages of the breadwinner, and concentrate on the home and child care instead. The decline in the birth rate during the war must have also reduced the burden on mothers and on their existing children. If the families of servicemen suffered differing fortunes, the incomes of those where the male breadwinner remained were almost always improved, as work and particularly overtime working was available in abundance. This was especially the case in urban industrial centres such as Coventry, where a number of engineering works converted to armaments manufacture.<sup>593</sup> But the economic benefits of the wartime economy were not felt everywhere. Oxford's Education Committee lamented the increase in requests for labour certificates for 13 year

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<sup>591</sup> Andrews, *Economic Effects*, p.145.

<sup>592</sup> Wall, "English and German Families", p.95.

<sup>593</sup> Thoms and Donnelly, "Coventry's Economy", p.23.

olds, which it had felt compelled to approve. 'The working men of Oxford have not, as a rule, benefited financially by the War. There is no manufacture of munitions carried on at which high wages can be earned, but the increased prices of food, fuel and clothing have to be met. In many cases the combined family earnings have been reduced as the mother and daughters are not able to supplement the family income by charing or laundry work in term, to the same extent as previously.'<sup>594</sup> In Oxford, the virtual shut-down of the University had calamitous effects on family incomes, since most men were in low-paid unskilled work connected with services for the colleges or businesses dependent on them, and a large proportion of mothers' paid work was linked to their domestic needs, such as laundry and cleaning.<sup>595</sup>

Thus far, the evidence seems to point to a situation in which children's attendance, with the exception of places like Oxford, would be expected to improve during wartime. However, there were also countervailing tendencies of the wartime economy, some of which sparked concern at the time, not least the effects on the family of working mothers. Although families gained more income from mothers' employment during wartime, contemporaries feared that working mothers would be unable to supervise children adequately and this would contribute to a rise in delinquency, both by children and adolescents.<sup>596</sup> But the changes in women's employment during wartime were not as dramatic as have sometimes been assumed. Much of the expansion of work for them was in traditional sectors, such as textiles or tobacco, and other unskilled work.<sup>597</sup> In armaments works, they were kept on unskilled work and no night working was allowed. Men were employed for heavy work. The majority of the female workforce still comprised young unmarried women, not mothers. Wall has estimated the proportion of working mothers as an average of 13% in London's working-class districts and even in Woolwich, close to the armaments factory, participation by mothers in munitions work was only 6%.<sup>598</sup> However, by the end of the War, 40% of the female workforce were

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<sup>594</sup> OCCEC *Oxford Ed. Cttee. Annual Report*, 1915, pp.28-9.

<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*, 1910-11 p.14.

<sup>596</sup> Winter, "Paradoxes", p.58.

<sup>597</sup> Wall, "English and German Families", pp.55-8.

<sup>598</sup> *Ibid.*, p.56.

married women, though not all mothers with school-age children of course.<sup>599</sup> As Wall comments, the War did not shake long-held beliefs about the role of women and in particular mothers. The emphasis on maternal and infant health during the War tended to reinforce middle-class expectations of working-class mothers at a time when some of them, due to increased male earnings and separation allowances, were better able to aspire to meeting them.<sup>600</sup>

The extra opportunities of wartime presented the working-class family with more regular income and increased choices about *which members* should work – traditionally, the children were the ‘second-string’ earners in the family, with the mother working only as a last resort.<sup>601</sup> Even early in the War, anxiety about the impact of working outside school time on children’s attendance prompted some local authorities to collect information about children’s work. In Bradford, the Medical Special Sub-Committee, as part of its review of under-fed children, carried out a survey of children employed out of school hours in January 1915. They found that the number of half-timers had increased only slightly since 1913, with 5,091 children or approximately two-thirds of 12-14 year olds in Bradford working half-time in the local mills. However, they found a further 1,258 children fitting work around the school day, the vast majority of these in elementary schools, though 194 were at secondary school. The majority (999) were boys selling newspapers, running errands or working in shops.<sup>602</sup> In London too, the education authority registered concern about the employment of school children, but the evidence from different schools varied and some thought the numbers of children with jobs outside school had fallen due to the improvement in the standard of living of the local population. They found that poverty was not necessarily the driving force for work, but that some parents responded to increased prosperity by allowing their children to stay on at school

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<sup>599</sup> Deborah Thom, "Women and Work in Wartime Britain", in Richard Wall and Jay Winter (eds.), *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.379.

<sup>600</sup> Wall, "English and German Families", p.97.

<sup>601</sup> Humphries, "Children, Mothers and Fertility", p.21.

<sup>602</sup> BradEC Bradford Ed. Cttee. *Annual Report, 1915-16*, p.23.

longer, whilst others were tempted by the high wages to send their children to work earlier than before the War.<sup>603</sup>

This points perhaps to the most significant yet unmeasured loss of school attendance during wartime, which was the loss of children who left school earlier than they should have done in response to the burgeoning demand for juvenile labour.<sup>604</sup> The effect was not to reduce school attendance, but to end it prematurely. A rising demand for boy labour affected rural areas even in the autumn of 1914, when farmers were claiming they needed to employ boys to bring in the harvest. The link between 'patriotic' pleas for boys to be freed up from the requirement to stay at school until 13 and the relatively low level of rural incomes put pressure on the Board of Education and on local authorities to agree to allow more exemptions from school, indeed to allow special exemptions for boys from the age of 11. This signified a reversal of the trend of the previous twenty years which had tended towards restricting early leaving. However, the lobbying power of the agricultural interest and the low incomes of agricultural labourers had always produced resistance to raising the school leaving age in rural areas. Legal restrictions on the employment of children in agriculture had been more generous than for any other industry and only introduced late in the nineteenth century. They were also the first to be slackened once war was declared.<sup>605</sup> On 12 March, 1915, the Board of Education issued its circular allowing the granting of special agricultural exemptions, initially for 6 months at a time, and with a monthly visit from an attendance officer to check on the child's welfare at work.<sup>606</sup>

Many local authorities colluded with local landowners and farmers to supply them with cheap boy labour during the War, but not all education committees were submissive to local economic interests.<sup>607</sup> We can see how the pressures from farmers, parents and the official sanction of the Board of Education operated to undermine the position of a local authority which was trying to enforce the attendance of older children. Buckinghamshire

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<sup>603</sup> Wall and Winter, (eds.), *Upheaval of War*, p.97.

<sup>604</sup> Horn, *Rural Life*, p.176 refers to H.A.L. Fisher's estimate of 600,000 by 1917.

<sup>605</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.167-70.

<sup>606</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1916*, viii (8274), p.19.

<sup>607</sup> Horn, *Rural Life*, p.168.

Education Authority had from its inception faced an uphill battle to control early leaving and to prosecute parents who removed their children without permission from school to work. The local magistracy were known to be sympathetic to parents rather than to the school attendance department.<sup>608</sup> Buckinghamshire received its first applications for boys aged 12 to leave school to be employed on the land in September 1914. At first, they specified that permission would only be given where farmers could show they had lost the services of labourers who had enlisted.<sup>609</sup> They also resisted requests for half-time certificates.<sup>610</sup> Despite this, informal consent was given on an ad hoc basis, though the official return for Buckinghamshire shows there were no special agricultural exemptions prior to February 1915.<sup>611</sup> Yet in early March, the Attendance Committee received a protest from one of the local trades councils about women and boys undercutting local rates of pay in agricultural work. They responded that they would try to ensure that boys were not employed at a rate of less than 5s a week, an already low wage level and one which they could not effectively police.<sup>612</sup> They also gave special exemptions for girls ‘needed at home’. Parents, seeing their opportunity, started to ask for early leaving for other types of employment, such as a girl removed from school to work in a house where soldiers were billeted. The case went to court twice, but the magistrates considered ‘though the charge is proved, there are extenuating circumstances’ and dismissed it both times. Another request for special exemption for boys to work at age 12 came from a manufacturer of torpedo nets ‘now engaged in work connected with the European War’. Even where they believed that an employer was neglecting or ill-treating a boy, they were unable to gain a conviction.<sup>613</sup> School managers also promoted the involvement of children in the agricultural economy at the expense of school attendance, especially in the summer months. One clergyman wrote asking that children of 10 years and older be allowed to stay off school any afternoons that their parents needed them; another school manager asked if boys aged 11 and over could be allowed to go to work, ‘just when the farmers desired them’ and a headmistress asked if her girls could stay off

<sup>608</sup> BuCC Bucks CC Att. Cttee. 11.9.1906, 7.3.1911.

<sup>609</sup> BuCC Bucks CC Att. Cttee. 7.9.1914, 9.2.1915.

<sup>610</sup> Ibid. 6.10.1914.

<sup>611</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1914-16, Returns of School Attendance and Employment in Agriculture*, 1 (7881), p. 325.

<sup>612</sup> BuCC Bucks CC Att. Cttee. 9.3.1915.

<sup>613</sup> Ibid. 11.5.1915, 7.9.1915.

to help while their mothers were working on the land. All of these requests were refused, on the basis that 'if such applications were to be allowed, it would only result in a state of chaos'.<sup>614</sup> The local education authority was caught between the pressures from farmers and parents, and even school managers, at the local level and the flexibility of the Board of Education at national level, itself reacting to 'patriotic pressures' from below.

After 1916, the Board attempted to stem the tide of special exemptions, but it had already undermined its position by failing to act against local authorities who had sanctioned under-age working on a large scale. The process of releasing younger boys to leave school early in one respect had no effect on the attendance statistics, since they were removed from the school roll and no longer counted. However, the effects on attendance were felt in schools, where teachers and managers co-operated with farmers in releasing children on an occasional or short-term basis. Mothers also retained younger children at home without permission to help while they worked on the land. Reviewing the effects on Hertfordshire schools, David Parker concludes that 'Parental apathy, grossly irregular attendance, widespread contempt for bylaws, and a sense of despair among head teachers – all factors so closely associated with the late-Victorian battle to transform ...schooling – reappeared extensively, just as the pre-war attendance figures were indicating the battle might have been won.'<sup>615</sup> In addition to the official 'leakage' of boys aged 11 or 12 to full-time employment, the participation of school children in agricultural work also increased, facilitated by extensions to the summer holidays.<sup>616</sup>

Whilst it is clear that in rural areas, parents consistently supported the removal of restrictions on child labour, the position in urban areas was more fluid as families responded in different ways to the opportunities provided by the wartime economy.<sup>617</sup> In towns, demand for juvenile workers increased, but without the assistance of changes in the bye-laws, there was no great exodus of 11 or 12 year-olds into full-time work.<sup>618</sup> In Bradford expansion of textile production made leaving at age 12 for half-time working

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<sup>614</sup> Ibid. 18.4.1916.

<sup>615</sup> Parker, "Talent at Its Command", pp.246-7.

<sup>616</sup> Horn, *Rural Life*, p.175.

<sup>617</sup> Wall and Winter (eds.), *Upheaval of War*, p.97.

<sup>618</sup> Andrews, *Economic Effects*, pp.149-50.

even more attractive than before the War. Boys and girls were soon substituting for female adult labour in the textile mills, as women switched to more lucrative work in munitions. Even allowing for inflation, wage levels for juvenile workers reached 'fabulous' levels, with a wage of 34s a week for a boy of 15 quoted as common in the woolcombing sheds and dyehouses, though boys often stayed only a short time on this type of work due to the very hot and humid conditions.<sup>619</sup> Parents of children at special schools, whose education normally continued to age 16, made pleas to the Care Committee to allow their children to leave early due to 'the abnormal wages which are being paid for juvenile labour'.<sup>620</sup> The buoyancy of the wartime job market did not, however, dampen the controversy over the persistence of half-time work and its effects on the education of working-class children in Bradford. It was regularly condemned by the Education Committee of Bradford LEA, but no effective action had been taken to reduce the numbers. It was the labour shortage of wartime which brought matters to a head with a proposal from the Chamber of Commerce to allow children to work full-time from age 13 – at that time, in Bradford, full exemption at age 13 was only available to those who passed Standard VII, a near-impossible academic hurdle for Bradford's schools and therefore an option not open to most children in the city. Despite protests from Labour members of the Education Committee, a resolution was passed agreeing to allow children of 13 to leave school for full-time work, but only on condition that the firms recruiting them did not continue to employ half-timers. It was a *quid pro quo*, which sacrificed the extra year of half-time schooling to age 14 for a full year from 12-13. Thence the numbers of half-time schoolchildren declined rapidly.<sup>621</sup>

In Coventry, the early stages of the War were marked by a rapid down-turn of trade, including textiles and engineering, so much so that young school-leavers were urged to remain at school until work became available. However, by early 1915, Coventry had experienced 'practically a revolution in local trade ...(which) resulted in boys and girls getting what they wanted – higher wages – while the employer gained his object, which

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<sup>619</sup> BradEC *Bradford Ed. Cttee Annual Report*, 1917, Appendix E, *Report of the Juvenile Employment Bureau*.

<sup>620</sup> *Ibid.*, 1917-18 p.102.

<sup>621</sup> Pressley, "Half-Time in Bradford", pp.14-16.

was increased production.’<sup>622</sup> Most of the new work was in munitions, with an easy transfer of work from the production of vehicles to shells. The work was largely unskilled and there was considerable substitution of girls into traditionally male work in munitions factories. When aeroplane production was established from 1916, the work available for girls increased further, their skills in stitching being particularly valued. In Coventry, the increasing number of mothers working was noted by the Juvenile Employment Committee.<sup>623</sup> Although the Committee considered too many ‘unsuitable’ girls were now aspiring to office work, its chief concern was the priority which the majority of working-class families gave to their offspring getting the highest wage, at the expense of any long-term investment in skills. ‘It is exceedingly difficult to induce Coventry girls to enter any other than the Munition industries... War conditions have resulted in a general spirit of restlessness among juvenile workers.’<sup>624</sup> The Employment Bureau tried to persuade young workers to stay with an employer, though their immediate advantage was to move for better wages and the Committee noted that at 15, boys were unwilling to accept the wages usual for an apprentice, since they had already earned much more in unskilled work since leaving school at 13 or 14. In the decade before the First World War, Coventry’s population had expanded rapidly in response to the growing industrial sectors of light engineering and vehicle production – bringing with them good wages and regular work.<sup>625</sup> Unlike Oxford, working-class families in Coventry were more likely to be headed by a skilled worker and to have an income sufficiently regular and high to keep them in reasonable comfort. The enthusiasm of young people to chase the highest wage was not a product of chronic poverty – but given the context, it is hardly surprising that young people were taking any opportunities they could get. As the Juvenile Employment Committee acknowledged when discussing the demise of apprenticeships, ‘parents, while their own futures are so uncertain, are unwilling to bind their children for any length of time.’<sup>626</sup>

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<sup>622</sup> CovLEA *Reports of the Juvenile Employment Sub-Committee*, Year ended 31<sup>st</sup> July 1915 p.5.

<sup>623</sup> *Ibid.*, Year ended 31<sup>st</sup> July 1916 p.6.

<sup>624</sup> *Ibid.*, Year ended 31<sup>st</sup> July 1916 p.5.

<sup>625</sup> Thoms and Donnelly, "Coventry's Economy", pp.16-20.

<sup>626</sup> CovLEA *Reports of the Juvenile Employment Sub-Committee*, Year ended 31<sup>st</sup> July 1916 p.4

What did the boom in juvenile work mean for school attendance? During the First World War, parents and children were fully aware of the ease of departure from school, with no questions asked about whether the work was 'beneficial' since almost any work was considered to be aiding the war effort. Even while the Juvenile Employment Bureau in Coventry was expressing its misgivings at the rush for high wages over longer-term considerations, they confessed 'that all must be subordinated in this time of crisis to the needs of the country in output of munitions...(therefore) no effort has been made to dissuade boys and girls from taking up machine work of a routine nature.'<sup>627</sup> Under the Robson Act of 1899, local authorities were compelled to allow in their attendance bye-law for a full exemption at age 13 if the scholar recorded an attendance of at least 350 sessions (half-days) per year for five years prior to leaving. This was the route by which the vast majority of school leavers gained exemption, not by examination. Thus it placed at least some premium on maintaining a reasonable attendance record from age 8 onwards. However, the sudden wartime flexibility, whether by reducing the age of leaving or simply acceding to more requests for exemptions at the due age, relaxed even the weak influence of the 1899 Act. Concerns increased about the behaviour of adolescents and about their spending power, which had risen dramatically during wartime.<sup>628</sup> It was not surprising that attendance at elementary school came under pressure during the First World War, under the inducement of well-paid work, at a time when families faced uncertainty and inflation. That the figures were only modestly down was most likely due to the positive impact of improved nutrition, lower levels of sickness and the continuing pressure of school attendance monitoring.

### **The raising of the school leaving age – its effects on school attendance and truancy**

The battle to enforce elementary school attendance was by this stage over the terms of attendance rather than the principle of state schooling. The variations in bye-laws and in employment restrictions on children meant that parents had been able to take advantage of a certain 'room for manoeuvre' on the margins, over the age of leaving – for most

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<sup>627</sup> Ibid., Year ended 1<sup>st</sup> January 1915 p.5.

<sup>628</sup> Horn, *Rural Life*, p.178; Hendrick, *Images of Youth*, p.219.

children this was achieved by means of chalking up enough attendance before age 13 to qualify for exemption. A minority passed the labour examination to gain their certificate and another group, significant in the textile districts of Lancashire and Yorkshire, took advantage of the half-time provisions to work from age 12. Even though the Education Act of 1899 had specified 14 as the upper age for compulsory state education, this had never been more than aspirational under the permissive approach of the Board of Education.

The end of the War did not bring with it a great surge of new ideas for educational reform though the programme advocated by the Reconstruction Committee, which had a major input from the WEA, envisaged raising the leaving age to 16 with half-time secondary schools to age 18.<sup>629</sup> However, there was at last a resolve at the Board of Education that all children should stay at school until the age of 14, with no exemptions. The provision for compulsory attendance to age 14 in the Education Act of 1918 was accompanied by a requirement to attend part-time continuation classes to age 18, but this died away within a few years due to lack of money for local authorities to run the classes, and lack of willingness of working-class youth to attend them.

It was the abolition of the exemptions which really made the difference to local authorities in their efforts to enforce school attendance. The legal loopholes provided by exemption, whether gained for attendance, for examination performance or simply because a child was 'beneficially and necessarily employed' allowed too much room for interpretation and parental pressure at local level. In Leicester, which had pioneered efficient methods of attendance monitoring, the attendance committee pondered the problem of keeping children in school to the end of the term in which they were 14. Traditionally, they had left on their birthday or when the exemption certificate had been obtained. They agreed that at first, it was important to take 'no case before the Bench likely to be complicated by sentimental considerations' and offered compromise arrangements in place of prosecution to six parents who had already removed their

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<sup>629</sup> G. Sherington, *English Education, Social Change and War, 1911-20* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), pp.102-3.

children as soon as they reached 14.<sup>630</sup> In Buckinghamshire also, parents took advantage of magistrates' willingness to dismiss cases against them for removing their 14-year olds from school mid-term – when one case was dismissed in November 1919, a further 16 parents went ahead and took their children out of school.<sup>631</sup>

A more serious challenge for rural local authorities was to 'put the genie back in the bottle' after the expansion of child labour and 'special agricultural exemptions' during wartime. In Buckinghamshire, the LEA thought that applications from farmers for special agricultural exemptions would decline soon after the end of the War. In April 1919, the attendance officers were ordered to get boys under 13 working in agriculture back into school and all special exemptions were cancelled. However, in September, special exemptions were still being applied for and granted for children to work at least temporarily in agriculture – in one case a headteacher wrote asking for permission for children to be employed potato-picking.<sup>632</sup> Buckinghamshire Education Committee still approved 122 applications for special agricultural exemptions in 1919.<sup>633</sup> In March 1921, the Attendance Committee confirmed again their decision to end all special exemptions for employment, refusing all applications, with the exception of 'special cases', typically requests for girls to have a temporary exemption to help with family crises.<sup>634</sup> The fact that the Committee had to return to this issue for such a long period after the War demonstrates the persistence of parents in claiming exemptions for their children to leave school early to go to work. The same process is observable in the records of exemptions given by Leicestershire LEA. The rate of exemptions for 13 year olds was maintained at a rate of almost 3,000 a year from 1913-17, with a slight decline in 1918 and 1919. Only in 1920 did the numbers fall away significantly, when local authorities had the backing of the law to support the imposition of a leaving age of 14.<sup>635</sup> Similarly over half-time working, pressure from parents, trade unions and employers persuaded the Board of

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<sup>630</sup> LeCCSAC *Mins* 27.2.1919.

<sup>631</sup> BuCC *Bucks CC Att. Cttee.* 11.11.1919.

<sup>632</sup> *Ibid.* 7.10.1919.

<sup>633</sup> *Ibid.* 24.4.1919, p.14.

<sup>634</sup> *Ibid.* 8.3.1921.

<sup>635</sup> LeCountAC *Leicestershire Exemptions.*

Education to allow for a period of grace for half-time – it was finally abolished in 1921.<sup>636</sup>

Restrictions on the capacity of children to work outside school time were also enacted by the 1918 Act and these were aimed at improving both regularity of attendance and children's health at school. Local authorities had been empowered to restrict children's hours of work outside school under permissive legislation enacted before the War, but only a minority of local authorities, mainly metropolitan LEAs, had taken advantage of these powers. Now all areas had to be covered by bye-laws restricting street trading and children's hours of work before and after school and at week-ends. The result was double-edged – on the one hand, it theoretically improved children's chances of attending school regularly; on the other, the law now had to be enforced, and this added to the burden on school attendance officers to apprehend boys selling newspapers or working over-long hours in shops.<sup>637</sup>

The passing of legislation to isolate working-class children increasingly from the job market and to lengthen their period of schooling was seen by those urging more investment in better-quality education for the working-classes as a step in the right direction. However, a more important motivation for reinforcing the importance of school as opposed to work was the concern about adolescent delinquency, which emerged as dominant issue during the War itself. Young people experienced a period of unprecedented freedom and affluence during the War, which tended to undermine the control that adults normally exercised over them. In some households, the juvenile worker would have been the main breadwinner, whilst the father was absent. The increased earning power of adolescents, as shown above, would also have altered the balance of household influence, with young people not so easily subject to parental discipline or control, particularly over the money available for spending on leisure pursuits. To a certain extent, this applied to children as well, as witnessed by comments

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<sup>636</sup> Pressley, "Childhood, Education and Labour", p.57.

<sup>637</sup> Larger authorities such as Bradford were able to employ a street trading officer for this work – see Bradford City Council Education Committee BradEC *Elementary Education Sub-Committees Minute Books* 10.9.1913.

about the large numbers of school children whose parents gave them 'generous' pocket money and the potentially corrupting influence of picture houses frequented by working-class children in their free time.<sup>638</sup>

The authorities' 'moral panic' settled into two debates, one about the need for occupational guidance and supervision to ensure adolescent boys in particular, did not enter 'dead-end' jobs, and the other about the ways in which juvenile delinquency could be prevented via clubs and other activities specifically aimed at occupying the spare time of adolescents.<sup>639</sup> Even before 1914, there was a tightening up of control over the behaviour of children and young people in the streets, with an increase in prosecutions for non-indictable offences up to 1912, although prosecutions had fallen before the War.<sup>640</sup> In 1916, the Home Office wrote to all LEAs asking them to work with local juvenile organizations in order to address the issue of delinquency.<sup>641</sup> In Hastings, 'in view of the alarming increase in juvenile crime in the land', it was proposed to hold a conference of teachers and youth workers, 'to consider educational and other measures to most effectually check the wide-spread and serious evils which are manifesting themselves.'<sup>642</sup> The LEA set up a Juvenile Organizations Committee, which echoed this concern about the increase in 'juvenile crime and misdemeanour' due to 'the darkened streets and the absence of parental control added to the influence of the unrest around them'.<sup>643</sup> However, the Committee could do little to respond in the way of new clubs or play centres, due to the depleted numbers of volunteer helpers available during wartime.

Many of the 'misdemeanours' by children were minor, but they caused great consternation to communities disturbed by the hardships and disruption of the War.<sup>644</sup> Numbers of boys committed to industrial schools increased during the War. Local education authorities were responsible for those committed by the police as well as those

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<sup>638</sup> D. Smith, "Juvenile Delinquency in Britain in the First World War", *Criminal Justice History* 11 (1990), p.124.

<sup>639</sup> For the boy labour debate, see Hendrick, *Images of Youth*.

<sup>640</sup> Gillis, "Evolution of Juvenile Delinquency", p.123.

<sup>641</sup> Bailey, *Delinquency*, p.11.

<sup>642</sup> HaEC *Hastings Ed. Cttee.* Vol.7 24.11.1916 – the conference was held in October 1917.

<sup>643</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol.8, 31.5.1918.

<sup>644</sup> Smith, "Juvenile Delinquency", p.121.

sent for non-attendance or due to their parents' neglect. In 1916, of the 25 children in Birkenhead Industrial School committed by Buckinghamshire LEA, 12 had gone there for larceny, 5 for parental neglect on information from the NSPCC and 7 for truancy. The figures for 14 boys sent to the Training Ship 'Clio' from Buckinghamshire show a similar distribution, with 7 sent for larceny and 6 for truancy. The contribution of industrial schools to the war effort was significant, since entry to the armed services was a popular destination on leaving. In the two years following the outbreak of war, 20 boys had joined up from Birkenhead Industrial School and a total of 160 former inmates were in the forces. Of these 'Twelve are reported killed, one awarded the D.C.M. and three mentioned in Despatches.' Ten of the Buckinghamshire boys who had been on the Clio had joined the Royal Navy or the Merchant Marine.<sup>645</sup> In Bradford, numbers of girls committed fell but this was more than made up by an increase in the committal of boys to industrial schools, which reached a peak in 1917-18 before declining gradually. In Shrewsbury too committals rose between 1915-18 but fell away from 1919 onwards.<sup>646</sup> In Oxford and Hastings, despite the concern about youth crime in the latter, very few children were sent to industrial school during the War.<sup>647</sup> Hastings LEA stopped sending children to truant schools in 1914, preferring the Essex Industrial School in Chelmsford, but it ceased to send children away at all in 1921. Partly, the change was a reaction to the deficiencies of industrial schools, which were still private institutions and varied a great deal in their levels of spending on the inmates, the quality of their buildings and the strictness of their disciplinary regimes. In addition, it had become increasingly difficult to find suitable staff, partly due to the effects of inflation on salaries. Hurt points to the impact of improvements in family incomes, combined with a gradual preference for probation by magistrates where there were no indications of a neglectful or damaging family background. The number of inmates overall fell from 18,976 in 1914 to 9,888 in 1922. According to Hurt, a key factor in the demise of industrial schools was also the

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<sup>645</sup> BuCC *Elementary Education Sub-Committee Reports* 11.12.1916 *Report of Chief Attendance Officer* 9.11.1916.

<sup>646</sup> BradEC *Bradford Ed. Cttee.*; Shrewsbury Borough Council ShSAC *Reports of the School Attendance Committee* statistics 1906-23.

<sup>647</sup> OCCEC *Oxford Ed. Cttee Annual Reports 1904-27*; Hastings Borough Council HaEC *Hastings Industrial and Truant School Register*.

‘decline of truancy as a serious social problem’.<sup>648</sup> However, it would be more accurate to point to a decline in the *perception* of truancy as a serious social problem by the authorities. The preference for less interventionist approaches to dealing with truants and their families and the growth in its place of a middle-class concern about the behaviour and prospects of working-class adolescents in the post-war period reflect changes in the thinking of the enforcers rather than any objective reduction in school absentee rates.<sup>649</sup>

### **Marginalised communities and school attendance**

The restoration of school attendance levels after the War and the general satisfaction of the Board of Education with local authorities’ performance in the enforcement of compulsory attendance tended to increase the focus of attention on those minority communities who were still not complying with the law, such as gypsies, travellers and canal boat families. Requests for the enforcement of compulsory attendance on canal boat families had been the bane of some local authorities even in the nineteenth century and despite an initial surge in prosecutions by the new local education authorities after 1904, some accepted that compulsion was unenforceable when the families moved on to a new place every few days.<sup>650</sup> Social reformers had shown an interest in the needs of gypsies and travellers but no special educational provision was in place for itinerant families with school-age children before 1900.<sup>651</sup> In 1910, the NSPCC proposed a law to ban children of school age from travelling on canal boats, but nothing was done.<sup>652</sup> Yet when they did attend school for short periods, travelling children, whether from gypsy families, or from canal boats, could not fit into the largely age-related standards of work within the elementary school and often their standards of hygiene and manners were criticised by teachers. One Coventry teacher insisted that canal boat children were washed before they

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<sup>648</sup> Hurt, "Industrial Schools," p.58.

<sup>649</sup> Hendrick, *Images of Youth*, pp.116, 250-3.

<sup>650</sup> BuCC *Bucks CC Att. Cttee.* 6.6.1911, 12.9.1911.

<sup>651</sup> Paul Bowen, "The Schooling of Gypsy Children in Surrey 1906-1933", *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 36, no. 1 (2004), p.57.

<sup>652</sup> Bowen, "English Canal-Boat Children", p.364.

were allowed to mix with the rest of the class. Some schools refused them admission altogether.<sup>653</sup>

The fundamental issue was the nomadic lifestyle of these families, which placed them outside mainstream society. Most local authorities expected their children to have low attendance and although they issued an ‘attendance book’ when the child was of school age, which was supposed to ensure a receiving school could place him or her in the correct standard, the book was often lost or misplaced when the school required to see it. For instance, one Coventry canal boat child had his book from October 1912 until September 1913 when it was checked by a school attendance officer. Only 36 attendances (ie days) were recorded. Another girl began her school career in 1932 with intermittent attendance at school – her book records her finishing in 1939, having reached only Standard III, whereas children were expected to reach Standard VI or VII.<sup>654</sup>

An article from the *Daily Chronicle* for 1912 highlights the isolation of children from these communities and the difficulty of absorbing them into compulsory schooling. Thirty caravans had arrived on a plot of waste ground in Coventry and the parents of 50 of the children were persuaded by the Chair of the School Attendance Committee to attend a local school for five weeks. The children apparently, ‘began to know wrong from right; their previous idea ... being summed up in the following: “Don’t give your pal away.”’ The article goes on to lament the primitive conditions of the caravans, although conceding that the children were all healthy. However, this was a highly unusual event, as the paper admitted, ‘this class of child is not welcomed in all schools’.<sup>655</sup> The incidence of dirty or verminous children declined during and after the War, so the condition of children like these with no access to sanitation must have marked them out even more post-1918 than earlier in the century.

During the War, the numbers of children on boats increased in the West Midlands, as they took the place of canal boat men who had gone in the army. In 1921, the Ministry of

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<sup>653</sup> Ibid., p.363.

<sup>654</sup> CovLEA *Records of Canal Boat Children*.

<sup>655</sup> Ibid. 7/1 article dated.16.4.1912.

Health enquired into the health of canal boat families with education as a key focus. The Living In Committee Report, like the NSPCC before it, recommended that children of school age be banned from travelling on the canal boats, but no legislation was passed and a private member's bill in 1929 by Harry Gosling, MP and President of the TGWU, was defeated. Bowen claims that despite the failure to legislate, the Report started a serious debate by local education authorities as to what kind of education was appropriate for travelling children and whether the families should be forced to 'board out' their children so they could attend school.<sup>656</sup> This led to more imaginative local provision for canal boat and gypsy families in the 1930s, but all the initiative came from local authorities supported by voluntary organisations such as the Church Army, not from the Board of Education, which was accused by the Ministry of Health of being 'generally negative, and lacking imaginative or positive ideas on how the situation could be improved.'<sup>657</sup>

### **Trends in school attendance and truancy in the post-war period**

How quickly did attendance recover in the immediate post-war period? Although attendance levels had been affected by family disruption and the abnormal job market during Wartime, as with many other social norms, the restoration of peace led to a reinstatement of pre-War expectations. It is possible that the 'social reinforcement' of children's attendance at school by each local community was revived in common with the expectation that their fathers would return to the breadwinner role as head of the family and their mothers would quit the workplace for the home. Apparently, little had changed.

School attendance was severely affected by the influenza epidemic from November 1918 through to the spring of 1919. This can be clearly seen in the Buckinghamshire data, which shows that the number of cases of childhood infections reported to the Elementary Education Committee had declined as the War progressed, to a low point in the year to 31

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<sup>656</sup> Bowen, "English Canal-Boat Children", p.367.

<sup>657</sup> Ibid., p.366.

March 1917 of 5,101 (out of a school population of 30,000) with a total of 160,000 'attendances' lost. The number of absences rose slightly the following year to 181,000 but the impact of the influenza epidemic can be seen in the 1918-19 year when absences totalled over 256,000 affecting 11,662 children.<sup>658</sup> Attendance in Coventry schools fell to 64.5% with over 7,000 children affected by the epidemic in November 1918.<sup>659</sup> However, the quarter as a whole registered the fairly 'normal' autumn level of sickness absence at 4.5% of the total school roll.<sup>660</sup> The reason for this may have been the effects of school closures ordered by the Medical Officer of Health, since local authorities were allowed to suspend the recording of attendance during the school closure period and this was not included in the calculation for average attendance monitoring. In Oxford, for instance, all the elementary schools closed for up to a month in November 1918.<sup>661</sup>

However, school attendance did pick up quickly in most places soon after the War ended. In Hastings, average attendance was running at approximately 84% by the end of the War with a low of 80% as the influenza epidemic built up. By June 1919, attendance levels had recovered to 89.6% and were then maintained at that level into 1920.<sup>662</sup> In Oxford, attendance had dropped, but relatively speaking it was still high when compared with other towns. However, in 1919, it reached a new low of 85.1% under the influence of the epidemic, and this may have been exacerbated in Oxford's case as the admission of under-5s to elementary schools persisted longer and on a wider scale than in towns where school places were in shorter supply. By 1920, it had recovered only to 86.6%.<sup>663</sup> By contrast, Shrewsbury, a smaller county town, had experienced a rise in school attendance rates during the War, from 87.3% in 1914, to 89.5% by 1917, presumably for local reasons, and this was maintained even in 1918-19. In 1920, the average attendance was 91.77%, the highest level of school attendance achieved in the town. Yet the figures for the rural county of Shropshire which surrounded it show a completely different pattern and much lower levels of attendance during the War itself. Here, an average attendance

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<sup>658</sup> BuCC *Bucks CC Att. Cttee.* 24.4.1919, p.13.

<sup>659</sup> CovLEA *School Attendance Sub-Committee Minute Book* 7.11.1918.

<sup>660</sup> *Ibid.* 8.1.1919, 2.4.1919.

<sup>661</sup> OCCEC *Oxford Ed. Cttee. Annual Report*, 1918.

<sup>662</sup> HaEC *Hastings Ed. Cttee.* Attendance statistics in minutes 1919-20.

<sup>663</sup> OCCEC *Oxford Ed. Cttee. Annual Reports*, 1918-20.

level of 81.4% was recorded for 1918, with a recovery to 85% by 1920, but only reaching pre-War levels by 1923.<sup>664</sup> This may partly be due to the persistence of child labour under agricultural exemptions in the county and other interruptions to the school year for seasonal labour on the land, which had persisted into the post-War period.

From 1919, the Board of Education resumed the collection and publication of statistics on elementary school attendance. However, only overall national figures were published, not county or borough averages. This signals the lesser importance assigned to the recording and monitoring of attendance by the Board after the War and was reflected in the new funding regime for local authorities from 1919. Instead of grants paid against the average attendance of each school, local authorities were to be paid a single level of grant per child by average annual attendance for the whole authority. Although the local education authority was required to continue to collect attendance data from schools and the Board stated its intention to audit the data held by local authorities, it was clearly a more devolved system which placed in the hands of local authorities the main responsibility for monitoring absence.<sup>665</sup> The national data for 1919-20 show annual average attendance was 87.3% in England and 85.4% in Wales, approximately 1.5% below the pre-war level. By 1922-23, elementary school attendance in England had reached 89.5% and in Wales 87.6%. From that point, attendance stabilised, varying from 88-89% for England and 2% lower for Wales until the early 1930s when it again reached the levels attained immediately prior to the First World War. This recovery coincided with a falling away of formal notices and penalties for non-attendance. For instance, in Hastings, warning notices continued to be issued by the attendance officers throughout the War at approximately the same level as before 1914, about 250-300 per quarter. They increased in 1916-17 in response to falling attendance levels, but then reduced to approximately 150 per quarter in 1918. Court prosecutions also fell away by 1920, at which time the Hastings Attendance Committee were issuing well under 100 summonses a quarter. In Buckinghamshire, whilst attendance officers maintained a rate of 35,000 visits to parents in 1919, they issued only a thousand formal warning notices in the same year.

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<sup>664</sup> ShSAC Reports, 1906-23.

<sup>665</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1919, The Education Code*, xxxix (268), p.43.

This does not equate necessarily to a decline in the work of attendance officers, though many authorities made significant changes in the methods and organisation of school attendance work after the First World War (see Chapter 7). It signals instead a different perception of the problem of absence from school, which was seen increasingly as a sign of deeper problems in the family, not as a typical behaviour of certain 'rough' elements in the working-class communities, who could be pestered or threatened into conformity to the law. Although the levels of attendance did not quite recover to pre-War levels, it was clear that the Board was satisfied with the performance of local authorities in enforcing compulsory school attendance. The only area of concern to be commented upon in its annual reports was the problem of canal boat families, a refrain that persisted with little action either by the Board or by the local authorities most affected.

## Conclusions

By 1922, absenteeism was by absolute and relative measures of school attendance a much smaller problem than at the turn of the century, though the War had reminded the authorities that only vigilance and clear legislation could ensure attendance remained high. This seems to offer support to Hurt's view that the overall attitude of parents to elementary schooling was one of 'grudging acceptance' and once work opportunities came along, these would take priority over school attendance. However, it needs to be remembered that the pressure from parents to release children from school attendance for work during the War was still at the margins in terms of age and in urban areas in particular, school attendance up to the age of 13 was not challenged.<sup>666</sup> Attendance rates did suffer, but this may partly have been due to the unusual circumstances in which many families and even whole communities found themselves due to the disruption of civilian life and loss of fathers from the home, a process which was intensified greatly during the Second World War. There is some support too from other historians for Steve Humphries' view that school during wartime was less popular with children – spending

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<sup>666</sup> Kathleen Dayus, *The Girl from Hockley: Growing up in Working-Class Birmingham* (London: Virago Press, 2006), pp.233-7.

on resources was cut back, substitute teachers were brought in, buildings were commandeered by the military and much time was spent by children on 'patriotic' activities such as growing potatoes and knitting socks rather than the more varied curriculum of the Edwardian period.<sup>667</sup> However, this does not mean schooling declined in quality for all working-class children during wartime.<sup>668</sup>

The issue of child labour had diminished in importance, since this had been progressively restricted and the 'loopholes' closed in the period after the War. Children at school were clearly distinguished from the adolescent at work. There was now no 'negotiating territory' on the margins of the bye-laws for parents to argue over with the local authority. This strict demarcation between the children's world of school and the adult world of work emphasised the aberrant nature of non-attendance, as there was now no alternative 'place' for childhood to be experienced other than in the school and the home. Whilst many children still 'wagged' school on a regular basis for fun or to help out parents, the principle of school attendance was virtually unchallenged – it was accepted as essential for children to go to school, unless there were special circumstances. Increasingly the 'special circumstances' were provided for, for instance special schools for disabled children – whether in residential institutions, in open air schools or in special classes within ordinary elementary schools, most children could be offered an education. This made any persistent truancy or non-compliance by parents which still occurred rarer yet also more difficult to deal with effectively. Truancy was increasingly seen by local authorities as an emotional or social problem of the individual child or family, not a compliance problem best addressed by the courts. It was thought by child psychologists and psychiatrists to be a sign of dysfunctions in the family or child's life best addressed by 'new forms of social management' with a 'new language of welfare'.<sup>669</sup> The steps by which local authorities reached this analysis of the causes of truancy and the most appropriate 'treatment' for it are explored in the following chapter.

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<sup>667</sup> P.194 above; Horn, *Rural Life*, pp.166, 180-81; Parker, "Talent at Its Command", pp.242-44.

<sup>668</sup> Burnett, *Destiny Obscure*, p.159.

<sup>669</sup> Shore and Cox (eds.), *Becoming Delinquent*, pp.6, 10.

## Chapter 7 – A problem redefined? Enforcement, welfare and changing perceptions of the child 1900-39

**‘Probably the most gratifying feature was to find that where once was conflict and antagonism was now understanding and even assistance. Today the officer was the confidant and advisor of families, and received a welcome as the friend and guardian of children .... School attendance work was being rapidly superseded in the many calls for child welfare work.’<sup>670</sup>**

### **Introduction**

By the 1920s, new ideas about the causes of truancy and other childhood ‘problems’ were influencing the policies and practices of many local authorities. The punitive approaches favoured in the nineteenth century – warnings, stern interviews with parents, court summonses, fines and attendance orders and finally removal to an industrial or truant school – were giving way to a more benign though also more intrusive approach towards the truant and his or her family. It was not an evenly-spread development, nor did child welfare ideas have the same impact in all places. At the end of our period, in 1939, some local authorities still prosecuted parents for their child’s non-attendance and one can find in the record local councillors or attendance officers who saw the job of enforcement as simply the implementation of the law without regard to individual circumstances. Yet, a gradual and subtle change in attitudes was evident amongst both officials and elected members in a number of authorities. Local authority elected members tended increasingly to accept that the state had some responsibility for helping to support families and resolve problems which caused non-attendance. This emerging awareness, not only that families had differing needs, but that the state *should* be responsible for doing something about them affected the approach taken in individual cases and the overall policy on attendance.

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<sup>670</sup> National Association of Social Workers in Education NASWE *Conference Minutes and Reports of School Attendance Officers National Association (Mss.71/1/3/1/1)* Press report of Presidential Address by Arthur Bellman 19.4.1924.

The change from punitive to remedial strategies for dealing with non-attendance is nicely illustrated by this example from Leicester City Council School Attendance Sub-Committee. At a meeting on the 29<sup>th</sup> May 1924, the members reviewed the case histories of several persistent truants, one of which was recorded as follows:

JPJ born 4<sup>th</sup> April 1911. On the 20<sup>th</sup> March 1924, this lad's father was brought before the School Attendance Committee to answer for his son's irregular attendance at school, the boy was present. It was further reported that the lad plays truant, often gets late at school, does what he likes at home, stays out late at night and is an associate of thieves.

The father is away from home frequently, for one or two weeks at a time. He obtains a precarious living by making and selling artificial flowers, his influence is nothing to the lad's advantage. The mother is weak and appeared to be worried and unwell. The boy could not make himself understood, nor could he understand anything said to him.

On Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> March, Mr Hincks (Chairman of Cttee.) had the boy at his office, Miss Grey, special school teacher, was also present. Mr Hincks saw the boy several times afterwards. On the 28<sup>th</sup> April the lad was admitted to the Royal Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, Derby. This boy presented a pathetic problem. Deaf and dumb, he is cut off from all the agencies apart from school, which make a lad's life not only happy but safe. He does not appear apart from school to have been brought under any salutary influence. It does not seem to matter to anybody what becomes of him apart from his attendance at school. There appears to be need for some investigation into the methods adopted at the special school for the teaching of lads...no report ever reaches any Committee or sub-committee of the Education Committee.<sup>671</sup>

This story demonstrates a combination of the 'old' and the 'new' in terms of official approaches to the problem of truancy. A punitive approach enshrined in the law on compulsory attendance still dominated the early stages of contact between the authority and the family. The father was summoned to explain his son's truancy in much the same way as he would have been twenty or thirty years earlier. However, the Committee was not satisfied with simply imposing a warning or summons. A desire to investigate the background, to understand the family circumstances and meet the special needs of a troubled youth were the dominant motivations of the Chairman and his Committee. Yet the absence of any 'professional' advice is also noticeable. The investigation was essentially an amateur effort, with the teacher present to assist with information and communication. The Chairman obviously wanted effective support for the boy, with a

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<sup>671</sup> LeCCSAC Mins 29.5.1924.

sharing of information between agencies, both voluntary and state. The fact that he was concerned about the deficiencies of the Council's response to his needs demonstrates a much broader vision of local authority provision for children than would have been conceived a generation earlier. The enforcement of school attendance proved to be the catalyst for official attention to the boy's needs and provision of special education. At the same time, moral judgements were being made by those in authority about the parents' deficiencies and the need for a 'salutary influence' from elsewhere. This case suggests that those working within some local authorities were beginning to change their approach to truancy and non-attendance and had become interested in family problems as well as children's specific needs. How and why was this happening in the early twentieth century?

### **Child welfare and school attendance**

The development of child welfare provision influenced the enforcement of school attendance in a variety of ways. Practically, the passing of legislation after 1906 resulted in new services for children and attendance departments played a role in the delivery of these. Alongside these practical changes, changing ideas about the causes of poverty and the specialised needs of children affected the way in which families involved in truancy were viewed by the authorities. Voluntary society personnel and charitable organisations providing child welfare services were increasingly drawn into local authority control. School attendance departments attempted to adjust their modes of behaviour and their roles to incorporate a welfare aspect in response to these new groups of local authority workers who were dealing with families' welfare needs. New ideas about child psychology and a growing concern for children's emotional and mental health also influenced attitudes towards truants and their families. Finally, there was a growing disenchantment with institutions as a remedy for neglected or delinquent children and a preference for supporting their families to improve care or control rather than removing the child from its home. All of these developments contributed to a gradual change in the way truancy and non-attendance were treated by local authorities. In turn, school attendance departments became part of a growing welfare apparatus in local government.

Evidence of the way in which these changes took place offers us a tantalising glimpse of the grassroots development of an emerging welfare state in early twentieth-century Britain.

The enforcement of school attendance had from its beginning ensured that the problems of the poor were regularly brought to the attention of attendance officers and local authorities. However, the shift in attitudes which became increasingly evident after the First World War had its origins in a variety of legislative pressures and intellectual influences emerging at the end of the nineteenth century. The practical pressure for change lay in the series of laws beginning in 1906 which are usually considered to herald the origin of the welfare state.<sup>672</sup> They are included in Appendix A (page 280 below). These acts of parliament were the product of a new approach to the problem of poverty, prompted by social surveys which had highlighted the economic rather than moral causes.<sup>673</sup> The mechanics of selecting children and families for the receipt of welfare services required the monitoring of the family and assessment of need. The enforcement apparatus which depended on information about working-class families became quite naturally an apparatus of welfare assessment. This inevitably influenced the way in which attendance monitoring itself was conducted and the responses of families to the authorities. The assessment of eligibility for a number of services, such as subsidised medical treatment for children, and free school meals, was often carried out by attendance officers, whom they had previously encountered only in a policing role.

At the same time as the surveillance of families was becoming more systematic and formally recorded for school attendance and for welfare purposes, the interest in children's specialised needs developed. These developments influenced the way truancy was treated and prompted a more analytical approach to families with problems. Underpinning 'child-saving' efforts was the desire to use 'scientific' methods to uncover the causes of social problems and develop specific actions for dealing with them. The evident complexity of children's needs led gradually to the provision of specialised

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<sup>672</sup> Pat Thane, *Foundations of the Welfare State*, 2nd edn. (London: Longman, 1996), pp.49-93.

<sup>673</sup> *Charles Booth Online Archive*, LSE, London School of Economics, <http://booth.lse.ac.uk> (cited 10.05.2005); Rowntree, *Poverty*, pp.295-305.

services first by voluntary organisations then by the state, for instance, to meet the needs of disabled children (initially the deaf and blind) and the ‘feeble-minded’. The lives and work, for instance, of Mary Carpenter, Benjamin Waugh, Dr Thomas Barnardo and Mary Dendy and many others illustrate the commitment of the ‘volunteer expert’ to pioneering such services, exhibiting both religious commitment and organisational talent in pursuit of their own idea of ‘child-saving’ from the 1850s onwards.<sup>674</sup> These ‘volunteer experts’ often viewed the state ambivalently – as a legislative force to secure the desired goal but not as the potential provider or controller of their particular ‘service’. Voluntary effort provided essential groundwork for services to support child health, protection, nutrition etc. while eventually demonstrating its inadequacy in the face of the need for universal care, vigilance or treatment. Many ‘child-savers’ were caught on the horns of a dilemma about the role of the state since most initiative had come from philanthropic organisations in the first place, but their resources were insufficient to tackle the serious underlying causes of poor health and neglect of children, such as over-crowded and poor-quality housing, low wages and large families. Some voluntary organisations, notably the Charity Organisation Society, therefore focused on individual behaviour rather than broad or fundamental social or economic issues. Likewise, after 1900, the majority of cases pursued by the NSPCC were due to neglect and poverty but spending on drink by parents received more attention than the economic or environmental causes of child cruelty.<sup>675</sup>

Other ‘experts’, such as Margaret McMillan, looked to the fulfilment of socialist political objectives as the means of attacking underlying causes, but she was conscious she was dealing with the unskilled ‘rough’ section of the working classes, who remained relatively excluded from political activism, rather than the respectable artisans who formed the mainstay of the labour movement.<sup>676</sup> McMillan’s emphasis on cleanliness and children’s health as the starting point for new attitudes to the well-being and education of the poor was reflected in the formation of the new school medical service in

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<sup>674</sup> May, “Innocence and Experience”, pp.276-9; Jane Martin and Joyce Goodman, *Women and Education, 1800-1980* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp.97-115; Behlmer, *Child Abuse*, pp.58 and 87.

<sup>675</sup> Behlmer, *Child Abuse*, pp.178-9.

<sup>676</sup> Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class*, p.40.

1907, although not all school medical officers had the intense conviction or belief in the redemptability of working-class families shown by McMillan<sup>677</sup>. Fear proved as important a motivation for new provision as the desire to produce better citizens – the concern for child health formed an essential element in the wider worries about physical deterioration and racial competition current amongst the scientific and political elite at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>678</sup> The attention to measurement and examination of children in elementary schools gave rise to increasing concern for those with identifiable mental and physical disabilities and such concerns were reflected in the way truancy was viewed, since alternative and specific ‘expert’ explanations could now be offered for what was increasingly seen as aberrant behaviour by a minority of children.

Hendrick views the influence of such experts and the classification of children, both in terms of health and special educational needs, as the product of an increasing and intrusive interest by the state in children as a national asset. The publication of Gorst’s *Children of the Nation* in 1906 marked the earliest plea for comprehensive state intervention to improve the lives of children, from infant mortality to child labour.<sup>679</sup> The most obvious outcome of these concerns were the acts establishing permissive powers for local authorities to provide school meals, and for the establishment of the school medical service, which made health inspection obligatory, but not the provision of treatment. These two acts were a springboard for the development of a state apparatus for child welfare, though the Board of Education did little to build on the public health potential of school medical inspection and left most of the initiative after the First World War to the new Ministry of Health. However, the Board did see the connection between child health and school attendance as important and this was reflected in its encouragement to local authorities to combine attendance monitoring with the new roles of health visitor or school nurse. In a section to its annual report for 1912 entitled, ‘Following up’, the Board of Education recommended a combined post of attendance officer and nurse because sickness was the ‘only valid reason’ for not attending school and only a nurse would have

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<sup>677</sup> OCCEC *Oxford Ed. Cttee Annual Reports, 1904-27*. See for instance Dr Ormerod’s rather world-weary report on the state of health of Oxford schoolchildren for 1907-8.

<sup>678</sup> Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class*, p.67.

<sup>679</sup> Hendrick, *Child Welfare*, pp.41-2.

the expertise to decide whether a child was fit enough to do so, rather than relying on an unqualified attendance officer who might err in the wrong direction. It was just as important to prevent an infectious child from attending school when he or she should have been excluded as to detect a shirker. The other reason for recommending the combined post was to reduce the number of official visitors to the home, and possibly to create a different impression on parents – one of a helper and adviser, not a policeman.<sup>680</sup>

The analysis of children's needs also became more sophisticated as 'experts' developed theories of child physiology and psychology alongside the social anxieties and investigations of the 1880s.<sup>681</sup> Child study, child psychology and ultimately child guidance clinics also had a part to play in the changing response to truancy, as did the fear of crime and delinquency. A new emphasis on children's minds as well as their bodily health emerged after the First World War from the child study movement, arising from the work of Stanley Hall, the pioneering American child psychologist. The 'reclassifying' of children's deviant behaviour as a form of emotional disturbance was developed in Britain by Susan Isaacs, 'the most influential figure in promoting a psychodynamic approach to parenting in the inter-war period.'<sup>682</sup> Attention was paid to inherited characteristics and the developmental phases of childhood, physical, mental and emotional. From this the theory of 'maladjustment' developed by which it was thought children exhibited abnormal behaviour in response to their environment, either in school or in the home. Abnormal behaviour was thought to signal future problems, rather than as previously, dismissed as a phase which the child would grow out of. The aim of treatment was to create an environment in which behaviour could be 'adjusted' – whether by advice to parents (in the case of the child clinics) or if the child's behaviour might threaten society by removal into an institution, such as a Borstal or approved school.<sup>683</sup>

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<sup>680</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1912-13*, xxi (6116), pp.543-46; Rose, *Psychological Complex*, pp.152-55.

<sup>681</sup> Jane Lewis, *The Voluntary Sector, the State and Social Work in Britain: The Charity Organisation Society/Family Welfare Association since 1869* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1995), pp.14-15.

<sup>682</sup> Cathy Urwin and Elaine Sharland, "From Bodies to Minds in Childcare Literature: Advice to Parents in Inter-War Britain", in Roger Cooter (ed.), *In the Name of the Child: Health and Welfare 1880-1940* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.185.

<sup>683</sup> Hendrick, *Child Welfare*, pp.163-72.

The Child Guidance Council was set up in 1927 as a voluntary agency and this sponsored the setting up of clinics which ‘showed a commitment to understanding children’s problems, from acute anxiety, phobias and nightmares, to bed-wetting, truancy, stealing and aggressiveness – problems now to be understood in terms of deeper aspects of mentality and emotion’.<sup>684</sup> Truancy was seen by the child guidance clinic as a symptom of a child’s emotional reaction to problems at home and suitable for treatment rather than punishment. However, only a minority of truants were classified as disturbed and needing treatment in a clinic. Like the truants committed to residential institutions, those referred to clinics usually exhibited other behaviours which excited the interest of psychiatrists or psychologists. However, some of the referrals would have happened simply because of the availability of a clinic in a particular area and an ‘expert’ ready to identify a need. Clinics were also seen as a preventive measure to forestall any tendency to delinquency in the child. For this reason, they tended to be staffed by a combination of medical staff and psychiatric social workers and they had no connection with school attendance departments. Clinics had no coercive or legal powers over the parents and children who used them. The ‘medicalising’ of truancy, where it happened, withdrew a small group of troubled children from the purview of the enforcement agency of the local authority. Deborah Thom estimates that the clinics saw at most 3,000-4,000 children per year by the mid-1930s so their practical impact was limited.<sup>685</sup> However, the idea that truancy could be an indicator of psychological problems was certainly current amongst local authority school attendance staff by the late 1930s.<sup>686</sup>

After the First World War, there was an increase in state funding of welfare provision by voluntary societies as well as a widening range of services provided by local authorities themselves for child and family welfare.<sup>687</sup> The consequent intermingling of local authority and voluntary organisations influenced both the activities and policies of local authorities over school attendance. The development of boys’ and girls’ clubs, the

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<sup>684</sup> Urwin and Sharland, "Bodies to Minds", p.184.

<sup>685</sup> Deborah Thom, "Wishes, Anxieties, Play and Gestures: Child Guidance in Inter-War England", in Roger Cooter (ed.), *In the Name of the Child: Health and Welfare 1880-1940* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.215.

<sup>686</sup> NASWE SAONA Conference 51<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference Sheffield, Easter 1939, speech by Dr Esher, Medical Director of Sheffield Child Guidance Clinic to School Attendance Officers.

<sup>687</sup> Lewis, *Voluntary Sector*, pp.85-6

provision of local authority play centres and the creation of juvenile labour exchanges all increased the supervision and control of young people by officialdom, whether paid or voluntary workers.<sup>688</sup> The range of voluntary organisations involved in different aspects of children's welfare was vast, some national, such as the National Association for the Prevention of Infant Mortality and for the Welfare of Infancy, others more regional, such as the Children's Play Centre Fund in London and some very local, such as the Balliol Boys Club in Oxford. Most had begun before or even during the First World War, but grants for welfare activities increased in the post-war period.<sup>689</sup> Even where the local authority was obliged to set up statutory provision some or even much of the official apparatus was provided by voluntary organisations or voluntary workers. The classic example of this intermingling of state and voluntary was the County or Borough Council Care Committee, instituted to oversee the operation of the Provision of Meals Act in 1906.<sup>690</sup> These voluntary committees, with a membership of elected members, local charity volunteers and middle-class ladies, expanded their area of concern from school canteens to include support for the juvenile employment bureaux established under the Juvenile Employment Act of 1910. They interviewed parents and children before the school leaving date and were supposed to visit the young person several times after to check on the suitability of employment and deter frequent job moves. Follow-up of juveniles leaving school was almost entirely in the hands of these volunteers, though often beyond their capacity to do effectively. Care committees were also often responsible for referring cases to local charities which provided clothing and footwear to needy children.<sup>691</sup> Formally, volunteers had little contact with school attendance departments, as they based their activities in individual schools, whereas school attendance was monitored on a neighbourhood basis. However, the discussion and concerns of the attendance committee and the canteen or care committee often crossed –

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<sup>688</sup> Hendrick, *Images of Youth*, pp.157-80, 204-8.

<sup>689</sup> Violet Creech-Jones, "The Work of Voluntary Social Services among Children before School-Leaving Age", in Gertrude Williams (ed.), *Voluntary Social Services since 1918* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1948), pp.109-113.

<sup>690</sup> Jean S. Heywood, *Children in Care: The Development of the Service for the Deprived Child*, 3rd edn (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p.111.

<sup>691</sup> Creech-Jones, "Voluntary Social Services", p.114; Susan Williams, Patrick Ivin, and Caroline Morse, *The Children of London: Attendance and Welfare at School 1870-1990* (London: Institute of Education, 2001), pp.40-59.

even more so once medical services were developed and parental contributions had to be assessed and collected, usually by attendance officers. More important were the links at the elected member level where commonly the membership of attendance committees and care committees overlapped, and they were sometimes merged. As legislation burgeoned, so did the number of local authority committees to a level which must have taken up a considerable amount of elected members' time – for instance, in Bradford, the Elementary Education Committee also covered medical inspection and had sub-committees for its canteen provision, street trading, special education, juvenile employment and after care as well as school attendance. All of these were concerned with child welfare in one form or another, and the membership was broadly the same group of councillors.<sup>692</sup>

Historical accounts of child welfare tend to depict the development of official attitudes towards children in the fields of education, crime, child protection, health, feeding and mental health from the infant to the adolescent as uniformly progressive. However, the motivations for action were founded on a mixture of humanitarian concern and fear of growing delinquency.<sup>693</sup> Fear of incipient delinquency had prompted the committal of thousands of children to industrial and truant schools in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, the influence of more sophisticated attitudes towards truancy also started to affect policies on the removal of children from the home into residential correctional institutions, though not in terms of a reduction in committals until after the First World War. By 1921, the numbers of under-16s being charged with offences had fallen from a wartime high of 51,000 to only 30,000 per year. The Children's Branch of the Home Office was concerned about the operation of the 1908 Children Act and set up a Departmental Committee in 1924 to look into improving the treatment of children and young people in the court system. Its report, published in 1926, laid the ground for the Children and Young Persons Act 1933.<sup>694</sup> This Act reinforced the trend towards the use of probation for young offenders and encouraged the juvenile court

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<sup>692</sup> BradEC *Bradford Ed. Cttee. Annual Reports*, 1906-7 pp.29-38, 1911-12 p.22, 1912-13 pp.27, 60-64.

<sup>693</sup> Heywood, *Children*, p.117; Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class*, p.65; Hendrick, *Child Welfare*, p.10.

<sup>694</sup> Bailey, *Delinquency*, pp.17-21.

to examine the background causes of a child's delinquency in order to provide the appropriate remedial treatment. At the same time, reformatories and industrial schools were falling out of favour with many local authorities and reformers, especially Alexander Paterson, the chief architect of the new Borstal system introduced after 1908.<sup>695</sup> His aim was to reform rather than punish and to inculcate habits of self-discipline and community spirit, generally by the development of team games. Between 1920 and 1924, the numbers of children committed to industrial schools and reformatories fell rapidly due to the growing preference for home supervision, which was also cheaper. Prosecutions for neglect or abuse of children also declined after the First World War. In 1925, the NSPCC handled 38,559 cases involving 95,512 children, but only 882 prosecutions were taken forward. By 1944, even though they were handling a further 10,000 cases a year, only 819 prosecutions were mounted. Warnings and advice and support for families were the preferred response rather than removing the children to an institution.<sup>696</sup>

The effects of these legal, institutional and intellectual changes – all of which were interconnected, should not be underestimated. The school attendance department and the attendance committee in every local authority had eventually to react to these changes, and at the same time had the opportunity to contribute to shaping the way in which new welfare provision operated at the local level. There were changes in terms of the attitudes taken towards truancy, in terms of the organisation and focus of activity of the elected members and in terms of the roles played by school attendance officers in relation to families and child welfare. The records show the operation of an emergent welfare state at the local level – a halting, multi-layered process, built upon yet also gradually replacing older punitive approaches to the family, in which individuals exhibited both 'old' and 'new' attitudes at the same time, and where the remedies offered could still be punitive as well as reformatory.

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<sup>695</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.193-6.

<sup>696</sup> Creech-Jones, "Voluntary Social Services", p.122.

## **School attendance and the widening agenda of local authorities**

The development of child welfare services by local authorities was patchy before 1918, since most of the legislation was permissive. If one examines the records of a large progressive authority, such as Bradford, it is clear that even before the First World War welfare provision had overtaken attendance monitoring in the meetings of the elected members, with consequent effects on the roles of officials. The introduction of school meals in Bradford was dealt with initially by a separate Canteen Committee, but its work was soon subsumed within that of the Attendance Committee. Time was increasingly taken up in assessing parents' applications for free meals, and in deciding whether to pursue those who should have paid but owed the authority money. Court work relating to this also increased, and the school attendance department was required to follow up cases of non-payment.<sup>697</sup> The referral of children to the Open Air School, consideration of half-timers who were deemed unfit to work, breaches of street trading licences and children's employment out of school hours all occupied the time of committee members and consideration of attendance levels per se decreased, even though Bradford's school attendance levels were on average low and not improving prior to 1918.<sup>698</sup> School attendance was still a concern, but mainly where absences from school might indicate a welfare issue which might be addressed. For instance, the attendance of boys with street trading licences was a focus of particular scrutiny, and their licences were cancelled if their school attendance was irregular.<sup>699</sup>

The effect of the 1918 Education Act was to extend this pattern of activity and concern across all local education authorities. New roles were increasingly created alongside those of the school attendance department – by the 1920s, Bradford employed a School Medical Officer and nurses, some working on school attendance in a combined role, a

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<sup>697</sup> BradEC *Bradford Education Sub-Cttee Mins.* No.43 27.1.1909, 10.2.1909,10.3.1909.

<sup>698</sup> *Ibid.*, No.44 2.4.1913, 10.9.1913, 12.5.1915. See also page 197 for details of Bradford's attendance averages in this period.

<sup>699</sup> *Ibid.*, No.44 10.9.1913, 22.10.1913.

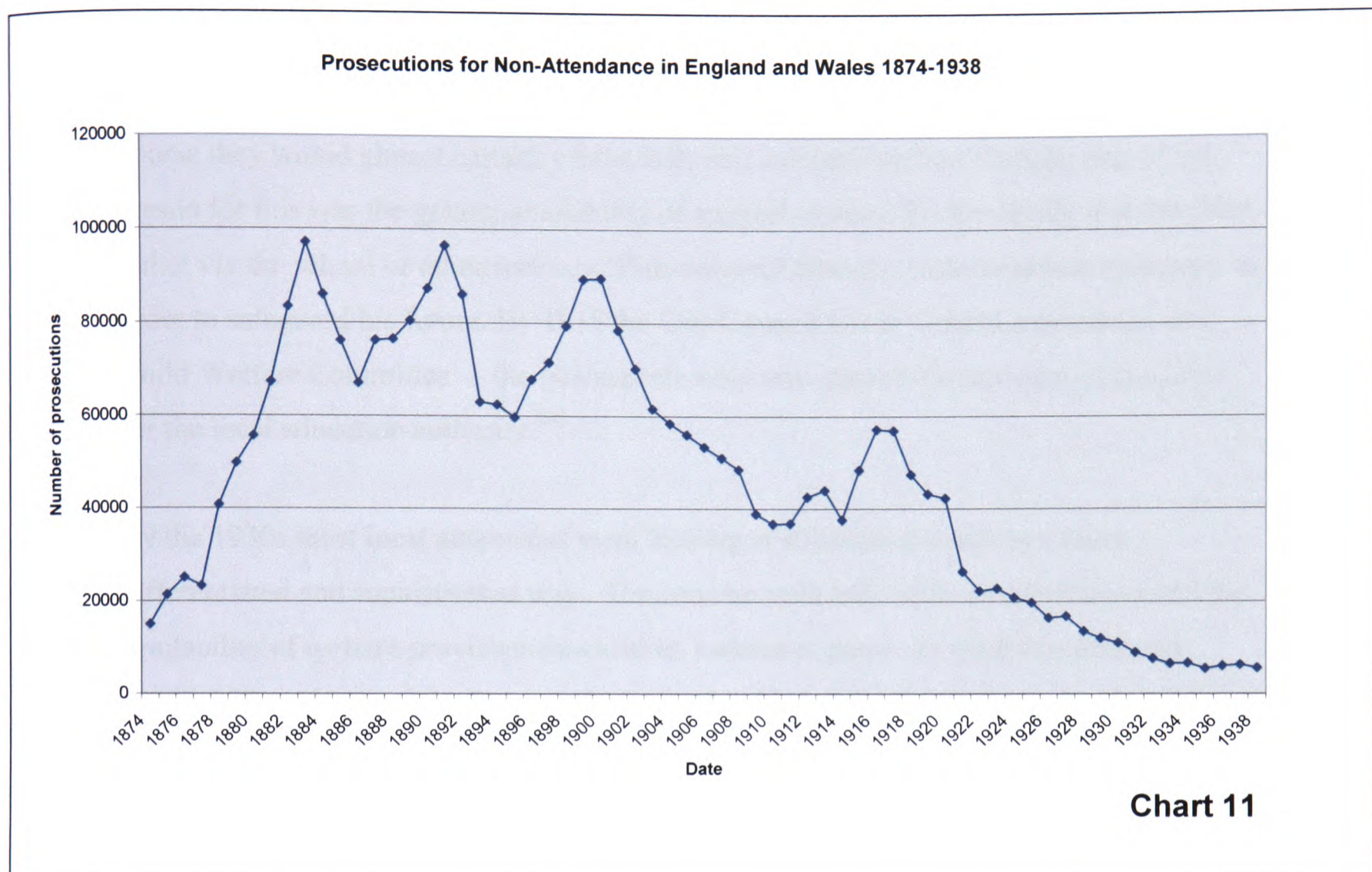
Street Trading Officer, an Employment of Children Officer and Juvenile Employment staff, as well as a police officer who dealt with court cases of truancy or breaches of by-laws relating to children. All of these officials had contact with schools – eventually the logic of the situation prevailed and departments were amalgamated. In 1932, the school attendance department was placed under the supervision of the Employment of Children Officer, who was by then also responsible for child adoptions in Bradford. This example shows how school attendance became absorbed within the growing child welfare provision of a local education authority. This is not to say that attendance received no attention from councillors in the inter-war period. Attendance improved in Bradford after 1919, possibly due to the ending of half-time schooling. Attendance rates in Bradford averaged 86% per year in the mid-1920s. This was higher than before the First World War, but still below the national average. Yet, on their own, attendance rates were no longer a matter of serious concern to councillors – they did not comment on them, nor were school attendance staff taken to task over them. Attendance problems were seen instead as indicative of wider issues relating to child welfare needs, which were addressed by a variety of means, not by prosecution. By the early 1930s prosecutions for irregular attendance at school in Bradford were running at only 15 or 16 per year, whereas 200-300 had been common before and during the First World War. Prosecutions of parents for non-payment of fees for school meals and children's medical treatment had increased instead.<sup>700</sup>

What evidence is there that local authorities *were* looking at compulsory attendance in a different way after 1918? In some ways, they were keener to promote school attendance, especially of older pupils, as a result of the introduction of a universal leaving age of 14. In Bradford, they even held a referendum of parents to see if they could reach a voluntary agreement that children would stay on until 15 if they broadened the curriculum, presumably to include vocational training.<sup>701</sup> On the other hand, there was a steep decline in prosecutions for irregular attendance after the First World War in all parts of the country representing a consistent approach by local authorities.

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<sup>700</sup> BradEC *Bradford Education Sub-Cttee Mins.* No. 51 includes prosecutions for 1931-3.

<sup>701</sup> *Ibid.*, No.45 21.7.1919.



Sources: Courts of Summary Jurisdiction Annual Figures for Number of Prosecutions under the Education Acts 1874-1938:- P.P. 1895 cviii (7725) p.132, P.P. 1900 ciii (123) p.55, P.P. 1920 l (684) pp.456-7, P.P. 1924 xxv (2265) p.742, P.P. 1927 xxv (2811) p.228, P.P. 1930-1 xxxii (3853) p.44, P.P. 1935-6 xxv (5185) p.510, P.P. 1939-40 xi (6167) p.310

Chart 11 shows the decline in prosecutions from 1900 onwards after reaching a peak of 96,601 in 1891. By 1914, prosecutions had fallen steadily to roughly a third of the 1891 level. There was a rise during the 1914-18 War, then another fall, to 26,973 by 1924 and by the end of the 1930s they had dwindled to an insignificant level at about 5,000 annually. This was symptomatic of much more than a desire to save money on court cases and residential industrial schools – it could be seen as signalling a change of policy towards truants and their parents. Another case from Leicester, this time in 1926, illustrates this clearly:-

[A boy] played truant from school from the 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> October. He said his brother took money from a shop on the King Richard's Road. They were both implicated in this and ran away from Home, sleeping out in the gardens.... The boy is very

badly nourished, and is somewhat of weak intellect, and his home environment is very bad. He has improved at school... and has been trusted, and until ...[now] has been found worthy of the trust.<sup>702</sup>

The Leicester councillors decided not to send the boy to Desford Industrial School, a course they would almost certainly have followed a decade earlier. Perhaps part of the reason for this was the greater availability of support systems for the family and the child, either via the school or other services. Thus removal from the home was less necessary in order to safeguard his future. By 1935 the City Council had a 'School Attendance and Child Welfare Committee' – the two aspects were now part of the same set of concerns for the local education authority.<sup>703</sup>

By the 1930s most local authorities were looking at attendance issues in a more differentiated and sophisticated way. The concern with individual circumstances and the availability of welfare provision for children seemed to place the issue in a different context. There is no particular period or episode which indicates the process of change from one to the other was complete – bye-laws remained on the statute book and some punitive sanctions were used right up to 1939. However, in practice the treatment of most families had changed, especially where problems were susceptible to other explanations than simply recalcitrance or avoidance of schooling. The effects of the expansion of welfare provision meant that councillors wanted to take a more sympathetic approach to truancy and could try alternatives to the standard legal remedy.

### **The school attendance officer – policeman to welfare worker?**

The legal changes of the first thirty years of the twentieth century in the area of child welfare had enlarged the provision and powers of the local authority. The consequent changes in policy and practice had implications for school attendance officers. By the 1930s, they sought to 're-badge' themselves by changing their job title - from School Attendance Officer to School Attendance and Investigation Officer in 1930, then to

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<sup>702</sup> LeCCSAC *Mins* 16.12.1926.

<sup>703</sup> *Ibid.* 5.12.1935.

Education Welfare Officer in 1939. General Secretary of the National Association, William MacDonald justified the latter name change - 'As long as we retained "school attendance" in our designation we should always be associated in the mind of the public with the old conception of the school board bobby'.<sup>704</sup> It is clear that attendance officers wanted to be recognised as working for the welfare of children and families, but had their role actually changed enough away from policing school attendance to justify the name change? Rose has characterised the role of 'welfare worker' in the inter-war period as 'a pedagogue and go-between, one who carried information, acted as a relay between different agencies, and served to inject norms of care and management into the home.'<sup>705</sup> This would imply a move from 'sticks' and towards 'carrots', or at least a sort of dualism with both coercive and welfare tasks in the role. The desire for a change of name however signalled more than simply a shift in duties – by the late 1930s, many new professional groups performed child welfare roles – school medical officers, school nurses, juvenile employment officers, probation officers and children's care officers to name only those formally employed – there were many voluntary workers as well. New professional knowledge was more in demand than the local 'on the job' expertise of attendance officers and they were aware of the competition for what might be termed 'professional capital' in the field of child welfare. As an established group of workers with a primary interest in children and families, school attendance officers were forced to react to the new ideas and methods of working which these groups brought into local authorities – ideas which emphasised responding to underlying social causes of deviant behaviour rather than the punitive approach which had characterised their own working method.

One might see attendance officers (both figuratively and literally) as the 'foot-soldiers' of the local authority, placed in a relation with parents and families which would always tend to the antagonistic rather than the supportive. School attendance officers were predominantly male and had working-class backgrounds, though respectable ones. They were usually recruited from the ranks of ex-service personnel, lower-paid clerks, artisans

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<sup>704</sup> NASWE SAIONA Conference, Sheffield, Easter 1939.

<sup>705</sup> Rose, *Psychological Complex*, p.154.

or even uncertificated school masters, though after 1902 Poor Law relieving officers were no longer recruited as part-time attendance officers.<sup>706</sup> The slang names for them, 'kid-catcher', 'Board man' and 'truancy man' convey the fact that their role was seen by the communities they worked in as a form of policing. Cartoons A-D on the following pages were drawn by an attendance officer for the short-lived *School Attendance Gazette* in 1902.<sup>707</sup> They present the attendance officer's view of himself in relation to a variety of working-class families and truanting children. Although there is a comical edge to these cartoons, they also highlight acknowledged weaknesses in the attendance officer's role. The cartoons would have struck a chord with readers who would have recognised all too easily the common excuses given by parents whose children were persistently out of school. This is most clearly illustrated by cartoons C and D, which feature in one case a 'virago' willing to resort to physical violence to prevent interference from the attendance officer and in the other a battered wife, cynical that the attendance officer can do anything to help her with her violent husband. School attendance officers were of course familiar with the vagaries of working-class family life and had long been known as an important source of what might be called 'local knowledge' born of a deep familiarity with the streets, houses and families they visited year in and year out.

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<sup>706</sup> "Biographical Articles," *School Attendance Gazette* Jan.-Dec. 1902.

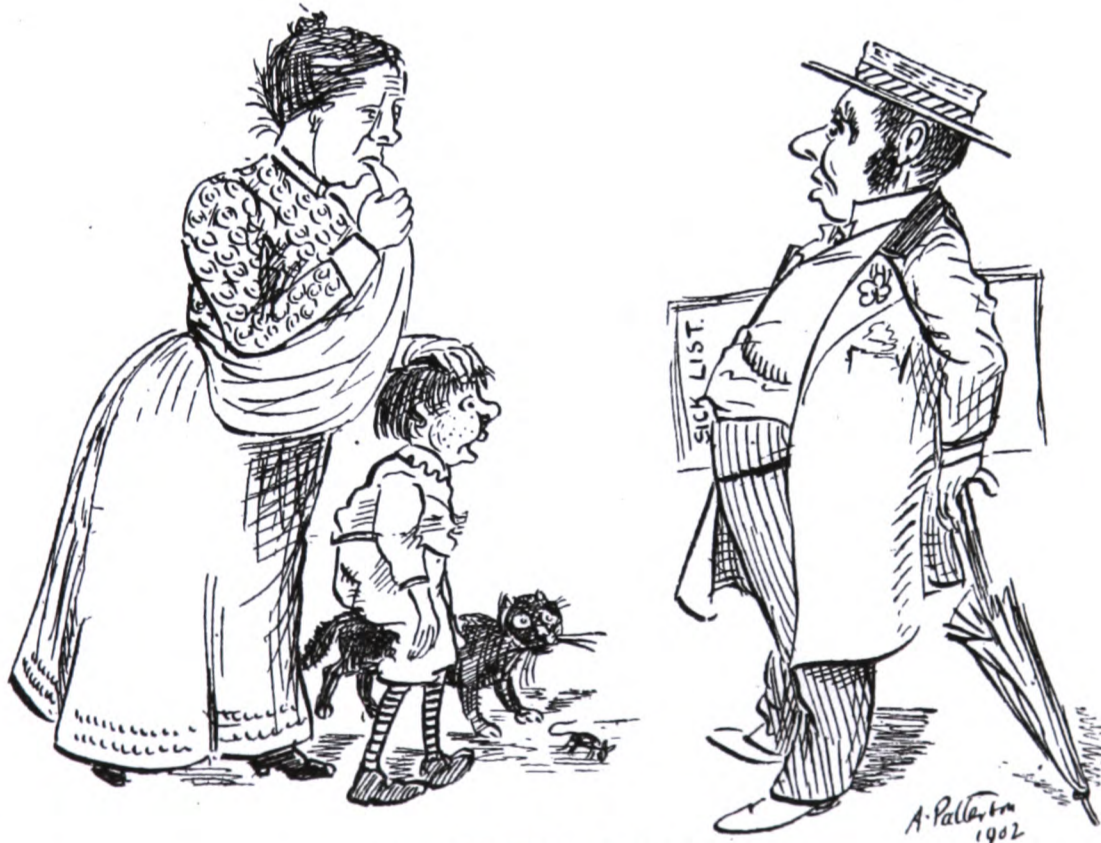
<sup>707</sup> *The School Attendance Gazette*, June, July, August, September 1902.

OUR MONTHLY CARTOON—No. 1.



FOND MOTHER: Bless their little hearts, they've gone to school like a couple of hangels!

OUR MONTHLY CARTOON—No. 2.



A GREAT SECRET.

BASHFUL MOTHER:—" You're a married man sir, so I don't mind telling you— poor Dicky's suffering from a worm!"

### OUR MONTHLY CARTOON—No. 3.



**THE CHALLENGE.**

MRS. SLOGGINS (to nervous officer) "I admits they're not at schole; but you jist try it on to take 'em!"

### OUR MONTHLY CARTOON—No. 4.



**"ONE FOR HIM."**

S.A.O.—" And see, ma'am the *Advantages* of Education!"

POOR WOMAN.—" Yes I see, it fills *your* belly! and as for *me*, why, my Bill's edjakated; and see what its done for me!"

Charles Booth in the 1880s used the London attendance officers to verify his classification of streets according to levels of poverty and add detail on the community life of local inhabitants for his social survey of the capital.<sup>708</sup> During the First World War, this knowledge was exploited on a much wider scale after the War Office co-opted attendance officers to verify evidence of family circumstances provided by those appealing against conscription into the armed forces.<sup>709</sup>

Cumulatively, the provision of school meals, medical inspection and other legal changes (see Appendix A, page 280 below) started to shift the work of attendance officers from one of policing to a mixture of liaison and information gathering about families and children, tasks which would certainly be recognised as part and parcel of later child care roles within a local authority context. More formal systems of information gathering were put in place after 1902, but they largely formalised and intensified a pre-existing practice. In Birmingham, from 1907 onwards, attendance officers visited each house in the city on an annual rota to verify the birth certificates of children and check on school registration, but they also recorded intimate family details – a child’s admission to hospital and return home, illegitimacy, a marital split or the adoption of a child.<sup>710</sup> As Ian Grosvenor has shown, these records mixed both factual comments and moral judgements about the state of the families observed, but as the reminiscences of Margaret Loane from the same period illustrate, this was common enough amongst the many officials who visited working-class homes.<sup>711</sup>

We should not exaggerate these changes in the role. The incorporation of what might be broadly termed a ‘liaison’ role alongside the law enforcement one before 1914 was not a clear-cut change nor was it universal across all authorities. In addition, the enforcement of school attendance had always involved persuasion and tact, since the punishments for non-attendance (even fines) had limited deterrent value, and this was well known to

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<sup>708</sup> *Charles Booth Online Archive*, e.g. Book B5, pp.1-159; Rubinstein, *School Attendance*, p.52 refers to other examples of the value of attendance officers’ local knowledge of working-class districts.

<sup>709</sup> HaECSAC *Hastings SAC* 13.3.1916.

<sup>710</sup> *BEC, School Attendance Officers' Census Books 1907-39*.

<sup>711</sup> Ian Grosvenor, "All the Names': LEAs and the Making of Pupil and Community Identities", *Oxford Review of Education* 28, no. 2 & 3 (2002), pp.299-310; Margaret Loane, *The Next Street but One* (London: 1907), pp.32-34.

parents and attendance officers alike.<sup>712</sup> Neither did the expansion of the liaison and information-gathering aspects of the job necessarily alter the fundamentals of the role, since interactions between attendance officers and parents were always tinged with a power relationship founded on the idea of defective parenting. The new services introduced after 1906 were not always seen as such by parents: monitoring children excluded from school for several weeks due to measles or scarlet fever, accompanying a child home on licence from the industrial school, checking on family eligibility for free school meals, or returning a child home from school after a compulsory cleansing of its head lice – all of these might well incite feelings of resentment and annoyance from parents rather than gratitude for the ‘benefits’ bestowed. In general, the visits of school attendance officers signalled something wrong in the family, not simply the offering of material relief or even useful advice. Legal and administrative changes did not impact on the role to such an extent that it lost its major focus on enforcement. Paradoxically, after the Balfour Act, the effectiveness of the enforcement role was improved in rural areas, even if prosecution was used less frequently.<sup>713</sup> The resources available to new local education authorities provided the opportunity for the recruitment of new full-time attendance officers, better office support and central organisation, usually via a Superintendent. More resources meant more visiting, even in urban areas. By 1914, when apparently truancy and school attendance were much less of a problem, many local authorities were investing more than ever in their school attendance departments.<sup>714</sup> The main duties were still the chasing up of children who were irregular or non-attenders at school and this was even more the case during the First World War, when truancy and illegal child labour increased and prosecutions resumed the levels last seen at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>715</sup>

If the role had simply grown but not changed essentially before 1918, is there evidence that attendance officers locally were changing the way they worked and incorporating a welfare role for themselves? After the First World War, as the law added even more to

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<sup>712</sup> BradEC *Bradford Ed. Cttee.* “Instructions to School Attendance Officers”, adopted 18.2.1914, p.89.

<sup>713</sup> LeCountAC *Mins.* 12.9.1903, 6.2.1904.

<sup>714</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1914-16, Statistical Abstract for the UK*, 1 (7881), p.395.

<sup>715</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1879-1938, Courts of Summary Jurisdiction Annual Figures for Number of Prosecutions under the Education Acts.*

the duties of local authorities in relation to children and compelled the laggards to catch up with at least the minimum levels of provision, local authorities gradually veered away from punitive sanctions for those who failed to send their children to school. Education Committees boasted in their annual reports that they had reduced prosecutions, even that there were none at all. The same trend was observable by the 1930s in relation to the use of residential correctional schools by local authorities.<sup>716</sup> The shift was away from removing children from the home environment. Local authorities were replacing punitive actions *against parents* with practical services *for children* and the ‘education’ of parents by means of advice and what might be broadly termed ‘help’. This is not to say that truancy and non-attendance were still declining – national average attendance rates remained around 88-89% for the whole period between the wars.<sup>717</sup> Truants and their families were instead treated differently by those responsible for school attendance, resulting in a more differentiated approach to the problem. Put simply, if school attendance officers were not allowed to prosecute, then their approach to the families of truants had to change.

Changes in the way the job was performed at the local level were at least as important in injecting a ‘welfare’ role as any shifts in the law, but it was very much a matter in the lap of the individual whether they offered help to families. The process of change amongst personnel ‘on the ground’ reflected the permeation of new ideas about childcare, poverty and the interests of the state in having healthy and ‘normal’ children, ideas which had been brought into the local authority by the absorption of services provided previously by voluntary agencies.<sup>718</sup> In many cases the delivery of the service involved the same people and some of them were still acting in an unpaid, though official, capacity. Their impact over time on the philosophy of school attendance, how it should be dealt with and enforced is visible in the pressures and contradictions which attendance officers increasingly articulated both locally and within their national association. The

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<sup>716</sup> Oberwittler, "Correctional Education", pp.22-40.

<sup>717</sup> *Board of Education Annual Reports 1900-39*. The statistical tables record average attendance for public elementary schools every year to 1938-9.

<sup>718</sup> Robert Harris and David Webb, *Welfare, Power and Juvenile Justice: The Social Control of Delinquent Youth* (London: Tavistock, 1987), pp.13-18, 35-40; Heywood, *Children*, pp.114-32; Creech-Jones, "Voluntary Social Services", pp.106-28.

introduction of ‘nurse-attendance officers’ by some authorities emphasised the move to an advisory and family welfare role for the attendance service.<sup>719</sup> Other authorities saw the recruitment of women into the ranks of the school attendance officers as the way to introduce a ‘social work’ approach to relations with recalcitrant families.<sup>720</sup> The provision of special education for the blind, deaf, epileptic and mental defectives, as the various Acts put it, probably withdrew a category of pupil from official attention who would previously have been the subject of prosecution. In Hastings for instance, the Canteen and Children’s Care Committee argued against the prosecution of parents of children at special schools for fear that it would put them off sending their children entirely.<sup>721</sup>

There was an awareness of and discussion about the relationship between family circumstances and truancy. Bradford School Board had formalised this even before 1900 via an analysis of the children committed from the town to industrial school – illegitimate, no parents, two parents or one parent alive, etc.<sup>722</sup> Neither were local authorities or attendance officers ignorant of the pernicious effects of poor housing on school attendance. The state of slum housing and its effects on family life became a matter of concern for many local authorities even before 1914, even if little practical was done until the 1920s or 30s.<sup>723</sup> Many authorities tried to reduce the infection rate of childhood epidemic diseases by quarantining all children who had been in contact with the disease and this pushed up absenteeism from school.<sup>724</sup> The failure of this practice to reduce the incidence of measles especially contributed to the frustrations of the attendance officers’ job, but also tended to undermine the enforcement role. Increasingly, attendance visiting was mixed in with a range of other issues for which attendance officers took responsibility. Families identified for truancy and non-attendance were often known to them for other reasons, such as illness, special needs or the assessment of free school meals, child neglect or illegal employment. The pursuit of employment issues

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<sup>719</sup> *Parliamentary Papers 1912-13*, xxi (6116), p.544-5; *LeCCSAC Mins 27.2.1919*; *BradEC Bradford Education Sub-Committee Mins. No.45 14.5.1919*.

<sup>720</sup> *CovLEA School Attendance Sub-Committee Minute Book 21.11.1917*.

<sup>721</sup> *HaECSAC Hastings SAC 4.6.1917*.

<sup>722</sup> *BradSB Triennial Reports* from 1883 onwards.

<sup>723</sup> *LeCCSAC Mins 1.2.1912*.

<sup>724</sup> *CovLEA School Attendance Sub-Committee Minute Book 4.5.1910, 31.5.1911* – discussion about how to deal with children excluded due to ringworm and verminous heads.

increased after 1918 when attendance officers took responsibility for monitoring restrictions on street trading. This could induce cynicism but it could also spur them to get involved in families' problems. For instance individual attendance officers referred cases to the NSPCC where they suspected neglect.<sup>725</sup> They reported on and took a pride in the progress of children whom they had seen go to industrial school, and then return to work successfully in their home town.<sup>726</sup> Too much initiative over the welfare of truanting children could lead to a reprimand, as happened to the Buckinghamshire officer, who advertised for second-hand boots she could give out to the children in her area – to the embarrassment of her employers, the Buckinghamshire County Council.<sup>727</sup>

Yet all of this 'welfare' activity was down to the individual officer, the man (or occasionally woman) on the ground with the autonomy to interpret the role in the local community. A confidential section of a 1911 report to the Coventry Education Committee noted the great variation in the volume of work performed by attendance officers. 'There is practically no check as to the hour their work is commenced...nor as to the length of the mid-day recess. There is also a marked difference in the influence which the officers appear to possess with the parents.'<sup>728</sup> Many local authorities tried to reorganise attendance departments, formalising the role in a detailed job description to ensure consistent performance for both the authority and the schools, introducing uniforms for attendance officers to emphasise their delegated authority but also to make their work more visible and accountable.<sup>729</sup> Some authorities revised their systems several times over just before or after the First World War, partly for cost reasons, as inflation met up with the increasing ambition of local councillors and executive officers to divert resources into more 'therapeutic' child-care services.<sup>730</sup> Yet the raft of new responsibilities imposed on local authorities did also prompt reorganisations which recognised the interconnections between school attendance work and the new 'social

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<sup>725</sup> HaECSAC *Hastings SAC* 21.1.1907.

<sup>726</sup> *Ibid.* 7.2.1916.

<sup>727</sup> BuLEA *Bucks. Ed. Cttee. Mins.* 16.4.1918.

<sup>728</sup> CovLEA *School Attendance Sub-Committee Minute Book Report of Special Committee* 6.2.1911, adopted by Education Committee 12.4.1911.

<sup>729</sup> *Ibid.* 11.10.1911, 29.11.1911, 10.1.1912 – Coventry provided a uniform initially consisting of a suit, cap and overcoat; a straw hat and summer suit were added later.

<sup>730</sup> *Ibid.* 21.11.1917; LeCCSAC *Mins* 25.4.1907, 7.10.1915; 27.2.1919.

work' functions. In 1912, Coventry LEA grasped the nettle of total reorganisation bringing together the care and canteen committees with school attendance and juvenile employment offices, to be serviced and supervised by a Superintendent in charge of the School Attendance Department.<sup>731</sup> In Hastings, attendance officers assessed and recommended children for free school meals.<sup>732</sup> They acted under the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act to identify children needing special classes, visited their homes and supervised their cases.<sup>733</sup> They supervised children attending school clinics during the school day and prepared reports on children due to appear in court.<sup>734</sup>

By the end of the First World War, some authorities were keen to shift the focus of the job entirely, not simply tack on extra jobs to the school attendance role. A review of Coventry school attendance service in 1917 recommended that the sort of 'warning' visit commonly undertaken by attendance officers be dropped and replaced with the automatic issue of a warning letter to the parents of non-attenders. They felt that visiting alone had little effect on the persistent truant. The report therefore proposed the replacement of the attendance officers with '3 inspectors, one at least of whom should be a woman', plus a number of girl clerks. Thus the work of chasing up recalcitrant parents was to be turned into an administrative job but 'the Inspectors should be expected to have qualifications fitting them to take part in the social welfare side of the work... It is on this side that there is most scope for development, and the Inspectors should be able not only to enforce regularity of school attendance, but also to put into operation the various agencies for relief where the root of the irregularity is due to social and economic causes.'<sup>735</sup>

But had the existing attendance officers the capacity to change? Despite the evidence from individuals who did inject a welfare perspective into their work, by the 1920s, most attendance officers still spent their time on a mixture of visiting, warning, assessing cases and producing paperwork to support the various requirements of the law in relation to children. Many of the more progressive officers were faced with a growing contradiction

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<sup>731</sup> CovLEA *School Attendance Sub-Committee Minute Book* 12.4.1911.

<sup>732</sup> HaECSAC *Hastings SAC* 26.2.1908, 27.4.1917.

<sup>733</sup> *Ibid.* 20.7.1914.

<sup>734</sup> *Ibid.* 19.3.1919.

<sup>735</sup> CovLEA *School Attendance Sub-Committee Minute Book* 21.11.1917.

in their enforcement role, a sense that it was 'out of step' with contemporary ideas in post-war society about the best ways to 'help' children and families. The concern about juvenile delinquency which emerged towards the end of the First World War highlighted the lack of effectiveness of past approaches to 'dangerous' children.<sup>736</sup> This led to discussion by local authorities about more sophisticated approaches to the reform of truants who were also involved in petty crime.<sup>737</sup> In addition, children's absences were increasingly medically-related, whether as a result of the increasing use of medical certificates by parents (the numbers of 'delicate' children were certainly on the increase after 1900) or the increase in the use of school closures and exclusions which were health related.<sup>738</sup> This led to the belief that other non-explained absences must have deeper roots in the family situation and should receive closer analysis than could be undertaken in a few minutes on the front-doorstep.

This change in perspective on family problems increasingly influenced the policies of local authorities in the 1920s and 30s, despite the pressures of financial constraints in both decades. There was a new focus in terms of the state's relationship with the family exemplified in a changing perception of the role of the school attendance officer, which had been conceived out of a patriarchal view of parental responsibility.<sup>739</sup> Under the nineteenth century laws on non-attendance, the interaction of the state was with the father, the head of household. He was the one summoned to appear before magistrates if the many warnings had no effect on the child's attendance and it was therefore seen as a man's job to chase up truants (sometimes literally as well) and visit the home. The focus on motherhood fostered by the interest in national efficiency and child health in the early years of the twentieth century meant that the concentration of effort was increasingly on the mother to nurture the child and fulfil parental responsibilities. New groups of professional workers, such as school nurses and health visitors, were female and they

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<sup>736</sup> Hendrick, *Child Welfare*, p.8; Bailey, *Delinquency*, pp.7-17.

<sup>737</sup> LeCCSAC *Mins* 29.5.1924.

<sup>738</sup> William A. Brockington, *A Short Review of Education in Leicestershire 1925 to 1928* (Leicester: Leicestershire County Council Education Committee, 1928), p.19; CovLEA *School Attendance Sub-Committee Minute Book* 1912-22 contains regular reports on absence from school due to sickness.

<sup>739</sup> In practice, attendance officers interacted with mothers not fathers, who were usually at work – a series of cartoons published by the *School Attendance Gazette* in 1902 parody the attendance officer on his visits. In every case, the parent he confronts is female – see pages 243-4 above.

were increasingly seen as the appropriate professional groups to take responsibility for local authority contact with families.

As Urwin and Sharland have pointed out, official attention moved from children's bodies pre-1914 to their minds and emotions in the 1920s and 30s.<sup>740</sup> The desire to 'understand' the family and its problems, not simply to get it to conform, became the ambitious goal of local authorities – not surprisingly, truancy was one of the maladjusted behaviours identified by the Child Guidance Clinics and the search for 'root causes' in the emotional state of the child or the relationships within the family provided work for the new professionally-qualified social psychologists and psychiatric social workers.<sup>741</sup> However, there is no evidence of any impact from ideas about child psychology at all before the mid-1930s on school attendance officers. The evidence suggests that changes in attitudes to their job resulted more from contact with a practical and paternalistic approach to child welfare which could be summarised as 'helping' and which characterised voluntary organisations in the field of child welfare.<sup>742</sup> The changes in services had brought within the direct employ of local authorities new professional groups who could claim authority and expertise in the field of child welfare – school medical officers, school nurses, juvenile employment workers, in addition to the many volunteer roles which were integral to the operation of Education Departments at local level. They stood to some extent in competition with school attendance officers.

Could school attendance officers adapt to the new approach to families and child welfare and create a new role for themselves? The professional association for attendance officers (SAONA) thought they could. J.T.Bramhall, in his presidential address to the 1922 conference referred at length to the changing duties of the attendance officer. 'He is adviser, consultant, walking encyclopaedia, sympathiser and reprimander in turn.'<sup>743</sup> John Stevenson, Chief Superintendent of School Attendance for Birmingham, argued at the 1923 conference of the union that the drop in prosecutions did not mean there was no

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<sup>740</sup> Urwin and Sharland, "Bodies to Minds", pp.174-99.

<sup>741</sup> Hendrick, *Child Welfare*, p.167.

<sup>742</sup> NASWE SAONA Conference Presidential addresses for 1923, 1924, 1931, 1932 all emphasise the welfare role of attendance officers.

<sup>743</sup> *Ibid.*, *Conference Report* April 1922.

need for visiting of the homes of 'negligent parents'. He saw the attendance officer as 'the outdoor linking up Officer' between the various branches of the Local Education Authority, the school and parents. He suggested a new name of 'School Liaison Officer'.<sup>744</sup> Yet at the heart of the debate about the name was a defensiveness, an awareness of being bypassed by newer professional groups who had marked out a different territory and made theirs seem redundant. The 'darker side' of attendance officers' demoralisation surfaced in the presidential address of 1926. 'We have to contend either with the apathy of the general public, to whom the school attendance officer is a person to be classed with the rate collector or the dentist – a necessary evil... Then there are parents who are openly resentful, regarding us as an affront to their parental liberty... No less disheartening was the oft-encountered apathy of local authorities who... refused their fullest aid.'<sup>745</sup> The core of the job was still the enforcement of school attendance, but with prosecutions virtually abandoned, what sanction did they have to back up their authority? This contradiction could not be wished away by changing the name. During the 1930s, some school attendance officers identified themselves primarily as child welfare workers and this was assisted by the 1933 Children and Young Offenders Act which led to some being appointed as Children's Care Officers or acting as 'guardian ad litem' for children in local authority care. A paper presented at their 1936 conference reflected the awareness of economic causes underlying family stresses but also their helplessness to solve what were recognised as deep social problems. 'Unfortunately, we as Attendance Officers can do nothing at all in many cases... Poverty and unemployment are National Problems, but the individual can do much to alleviate the hardship and to lessen the indifference. We can all help by sympathy with the parents in their difficulties, but putting them in touch with Societies or Organisations that can do something to help... Our chief concern is the CHILD, not the Parent.'<sup>746</sup>

Despite the aspirations of the trade union, the welfare role did not sit well with the enforcement role, which still formed a part of the duties of the education welfare officer.

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<sup>744</sup> Ibid., *Conference Report* Second Session March 1923.

<sup>745</sup> Ibid., *Conference Report* April 1926.

<sup>746</sup> Ibid., *Conference Report* Easter 1936, presented by H. Coleman of Salford Branch.

But the problems were deeper than that – attendance officers had been superseded by new professional groups concerned with child welfare and this meant they couldn't easily be fitted into new local authority departments focused on services rather than law enforcement, nor were their aspirations to be considered as welfare workers accepted by other groups.<sup>747</sup> The reasons for their failure to transform themselves into a new profession of child welfare worker were not just connected to the contradictions in the role. They were related to the whole conception of who was suitable to work professionally in child welfare – put shortly one had to be female and possess a qualification. This difference is illustrated nicely by a row which took place at the 1934 Conference of SAIONA. This was over a resolution of the Brighton Branch against the employment of a woman as an 'Inquiry Officer' to provide reports on young people going to court under the 1933 Act.<sup>748</sup> Such appointments of women reflect the influence of the volunteer workers and middle-class ladies, who made up the membership of care committees. Of course, women had also been employed as school attendance officers, many of them during the First World War, and always on lower wages than the men.<sup>749</sup> However, the basis for the opposition to this appointment was not just the gender factor. The actual discussion at the Conference shows that the fundamental issue for the Brighton Officers was that the woman was not experienced in school attendance work and was a stranger to Brighton – she knew 'nothing of its people'. These Officers saw their expertise as rooted in both 'on the job' experience visiting homes and schools, and in their intimate knowledge of the local working-class communities. But this expertise was not valued in the new dispensation – instead, what were thought to be the inherent nurturing qualities of women were judged to be best suited for the 'sympathetic' role of child welfare worker.<sup>750</sup> And increasingly the prizing of formal qualifications and

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<sup>747</sup> Barbara N. Rodgers and Julia Dixon, *Portrait of Social Work: A Study of Social Services in a Northern Town* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp.56-61 shows that even 20 years on, there was a disparity between officers' perceptions of their social work role and the way other local authority welfare workers saw them.

<sup>748</sup> NASWE SAIONA Conference, Resolution of Brighton Branch to Conference, Easter 1934.

<sup>749</sup> BuCC Bucks CC Att. Cttee. 8.2.1916, 26.7.1917, 9,10,1917, 1,8,1918; CovLEA School Attendance Sub-Committee Minute Book 16.4.1919.

<sup>750</sup> Jane Lewis, "Gender, the Family and Women's Agency in the Building of "Welfare States": The British Case", *Social History* 19 (1994), pp.40-1; Harris and Webb, *Juvenile Justice*, p.94; Anne Logan, "A Suitable Person for Suitable Cases: The Gendering of Juvenile Courts in England, c.1910-39", *Twentieth Century British History* 16, no. 2 (2005), p.132-33.

professional training isolated the attendance officers, who had little formal training and usually no qualifications, from promotion to their ranks.

The most progressive attendance officers certainly took on board the new philosophy of social engagement and child-focused welfare support. They were involved in a range of interventions with troubled children and their families which went far beyond the old 'warn and prosecute' role of the nineteenth century. The absorption and enmeshing of voluntary work into local authority responsibilities progressively from 1906 had pushed school attendance to the margins of concern – overtaken by health, housing and the provision of social support for families. Absence from school was a problem to be treated, not a crime to be punished in the majority of cases. One senses the mixture of cynicism, helplessness in the face of deep social ills and fellow-feeling for the families he visited in the reminiscences of Arthur Kellett, a Manchester Attendance Officer of the 1930s.

Nine o'clock on a nasty drizzly morning in November 1936 and the school attendance officer is ready to set off on his daily round. .. to make his first call on Mrs X...How futile it all seems: there is already a third non-compliance with a school attendance order in force and if the case goes to court again, the best that can be hoped for will be a three months' adjournment.

A short brisk walk takes the officer into the St George's area. Impossible to knock on the wrong door in either Church Street or Cawdor Street. The officer knocks then steps back smartly in an effort to avoid the blast of fetid air that will meet him as the front door opens. What is the cause? Is it bugs, body odour, dry rot, or a combination of all three?

Better hurry to Liverpool Road Canteen where 250 children would partake of the only decent meal they would have that day.... What a dismal story most of the visits told; already nine new cases of scarlet fever, that meant seven weeks exclusion from school for each patient.<sup>751</sup>

By the late 1930s, the education welfare officer was caught up in a demoralising trap, which has become familiar even to many modern-day social workers. He felt responsible for the children on his list, but was unable to resolve the underlying social ills which constantly hindered their families. His presence both in the homes of the absentees and at

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<sup>751</sup> Reproduced in Frank Coombes and Dave Beer, *The Long Walk from the Dark* (Birmingham: NASWE, 1984), pp.13-21.

their schools signalled the impotence of the state rather than its potential to change things for the better.

### **School attendance and the monitoring of the family in the 1930s**

The reminiscences of Arthur Kellet highlight the continuing association of poverty with truancy. Kellet's phrase, 'impossible to knock on the wrong door' reflects a common perception by the 1930s, that school attendance problems were confined mainly to a particular socio-economic class, mostly the very poor, those in bad housing, with large families and little visible means of support. His reminiscences also reflect the view of some attendance officers that court orders were a dead letter and that the sanctions used by local authorities were no longer effective. In the early 1930s, elementary school attendance rates returned to the levels seen before the First World War, reaching a peak of 89.7% in 1931-2. That this coincided with the onset of the Depression suggests the possibility that whereas the abundance of work available in the 1914-18 period helped undermine school attendance, a relative lack of work for adults and school leavers tended to keep children in school. However, the variation in rates of attendance over the whole period from 1922-39 was very small, less than 2%. The stability of these figures in the inter-war period perhaps suggests that only a small minority of the elementary school population had irregular attendance, presumably those from the very lowest socio-economic group, where poverty underlay other causes of absence. Nonetheless, school attendance officers continued to monitor and record information on all working-class children and their families in their districts, not simply those who might be thought vulnerable to failings in attendance.<sup>752</sup>

By the 1930s, many authorities had built up copious records of families in their local area over several decades. Few of these remain, but in Birmingham, more than 4,000 School Attendance Officers' Census Books present a source of evidence at once comprehensive yet idiosyncratic as each attendance officer jotted down in his notebook the circumstances of individual families he visited from year to year. From these, it was

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<sup>752</sup> Garland, *Punishment*, p251.

possible to compare the comments on two contrasting districts in order to build up a picture of working-class family life and judge the extent to which signs of poverty and family problems were concentrated only amongst the very poorest. The two areas chosen were Deritend, a poor slum district, some of which was cleared as early as 1911, and Erdington, an area of mixed housing, which was expanding with some clearance and new building in the 1930s. Most of the working-class occupations mentioned were typical for Birmingham industry – brass workers, cycle workers and metal workers and porters, labourers and hawkers. The extent of overcrowding was noticeable in Deritend, with most of the families living in courts behind the main roads. The courts always had more children in them than the houses on the main roads. For instance, in court 35 behind Charles Henry Street, a total of 68 children from 20 families lived in the 9 houses over a two and a half-year period.<sup>753</sup> The ‘turnover’ of families was high, some addresses occupied for just a few months in each case. Much of the movement by families was extremely local, or in and out of the workhouse, a pattern typical of slum areas where people were either dodging the rent collector or moving to get into a better property. There are many other indicators of the volatile circumstances of family life in Deritend. Illegitimate children were noted frequently and even more after the First World War. Notes of separation and divorce were also more common after 1918, the outcome sometimes a complex family arrangement, as shown by a series of notes on the tenants of the Acorn Inn, 140 Cheapside. The father was in the army by 1915 and the children in the care of an uncle whilst the mother lived with another man. By 1918, they were noted as ‘living with Grandmother. Parents separated.’ In the 1920s, the new occupants were a family with 3 children noted as ‘Divorced subject. Both parents remarried’. The eldest girl was placed in an orphanage.<sup>754</sup> At 139 High Street, a house described as ‘lock up with Lodg Bk’; the monitoring between 1925 and 1939 revealed ‘Father deserted family’ in 1928, and a later tenant ‘co-habiting with WH ... 3 boys still in SHH (Summer Hills Homes)’ while further down the street a woman with her 2 children ‘contracted bigamous mge’.<sup>755</sup>

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<sup>753</sup> BEC, *School Attendance Officers' Census Books 1907-39*, Book 58.

<sup>754</sup> *Ibid.*, Book 739.

<sup>755</sup> *Ibid.*, Book 1171.

Erdington contained a greater mix of housing, with some middle-class roads alongside cottages and terraces of working-class housing, although the occupations of the inhabitants of these terraces were similar to those in Deritend, a mixture of bricklayers, labourers, metal workers and in the 1930s, rubber workers. The number of larger families noted was fewer than in Deritend, though there were pockets of occupation similar to those in Deritend, for instance a new working-class housing area occupied from 1935 onwards contained 135 houses in Springthorpe Road which listed 19 families with 5 children, 7 with 6 children, 6 with 7 children and 2 with 8 children, as well as many with only 3 or 4 in the period up to 1949. In fact, there was virtually no house in Springthorpe Road without children at any time during the period covered by the attendance officers' book. Unlike the shifting population of Deritend, the turnover of occupancy was low however – for most houses only one or two changes in a twenty year period. No illegitimate children were noted in this area over the period covered.<sup>756</sup>

School attendance officers were not instructed to comment on family circumstances. Their notes were necessarily episodic and depended on what the officer saw as useful for his work. The relative stability of families, smaller family sizes and the lack of frequent house moves marks out the Erdington area as a more stable environment for children, where there seems to have been less illness and few child deaths, as well as less family break-up. One would have expected truancy levels to have been higher in Deritend than in Erdington, however, no attendance statistics remain for the local schools. The picture given by the attendance officers' records is of a widening gap between the stability of family life in the new housing areas of the city and those in the slums.<sup>757</sup>

Unfortunately, there is little suitable evidence available for the 1930s to judge the effects of housing changes, or other social and economic shifts, on school attendance. During the Second World War, attendance at school came under pressure from many sources, evacuation, bombing damage to schools and homes, shortage of staff and once again the enticement of employment for children. There were no annual reports of the Board of

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<sup>756</sup> *Ibid.*, Book 1658.

<sup>757</sup> Asa Briggs, *History of Birmingham, vol. 2: Borough and City 1865-1938* (3 vols., London: Oxford University Press, 1952-74), p.232.

Education after 1939 and following the establishing of the Ministry, the first report after the War in 1947 makes no mention of school attendance at all. However, a pioneering study of sickness and school attendance was undertaken by E.R. Bransby, Social Economist at the Ministry of Health in 1947-8 in association with the Ministry of Education.<sup>758</sup> The study involved a year long recording of the medical and non-medical absences of 9,444 children at schools in Birmingham, Sheffield, Worcestershire and Kesteven. The study made little comment on differences related to those in the rural areas (2,173) as against those in the city environment (7,271). It compared the causes of absence and the rates of absence of children from four types of neighbourhood – slum areas scheduled for clearance (like Deritend), working-class areas not scheduled for clearance, new housing estates and mixed residential areas (like Erdington). The absence rates of children were also analysed on the basis of other socio-economic factors, including social class, size of family, over-crowding, participation in school meals, adequacy of parental care, working mother and mother's interest in the child's schooling. Much of the information was recorded by teachers and school attendance officers; thus the judgements about the home and the parental care were necessarily more subjective than information, say, about the father's occupation or size of family.

Bransby found that absence related to common infectious diseases showed little variation across social class or type of housing. Younger children were more vulnerable to a range of common infections, such as diphtheria, measles, German measles, chicken-pox, mumps and scarlet fever. Only children tended to have more absence from these, possibly due to extra caution by mothers or lack of exposure in the pre-school years. He was able to abstract these from other absences, whether medical or non-medical, and most of the study concentrated on absence excluding that related to common infectious diseases. He was aware that the data revealed more about the decision-making of parents and children about whether to attend school or not, than objective information about the incidence of illness.<sup>759</sup> This proved to be the most interesting aspect of his research, since he found that 'the most striking feature is the variation for children of the same sex and age in

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<sup>758</sup> E.R. Bransby, "Study of Absence from School", *The Medical Officer* (1951), 1<sup>st</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> December issues – I am grateful to the staff of Birmingham City Archives for drawing my attention to this paper.

<sup>759</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

different districts.’<sup>760</sup> This he attributed mainly to social and economic factors, although the difference in both medical and non-medical absence rates between children from different classes was less than expected. More intriguing however was a study of children from families in Social Class III (headed by skilled workers) which showed that the absence rates of those who went to school in poor neighbourhoods were greater than those who lived in better areas, even though their economic circumstances should have been similar. Bransby called this ‘another social factor which might be called a “neighbourhood” factor’.<sup>761</sup> There could have been an effect on attendance of individual schools or attendance officers which might have raised or lowered attendance rates in a particular district. However, it seems unlikely that individual school effects could explain the variation in patterns noted in this study, given the size of the sample and the number of schools which must have been involved. Most of the schools would have drawn the majority of their pupils from the local community and thus reflected in their attendance patterns the factors identified by Bransby. The influence of neighbourhood on patterns of truancy was noted in Chapter 4. It seems to have been a tenacious factor in reproducing poor school attendance, for in Birmingham and Sheffield fifty years later, the neighbourhood of the home and school was still the key determinant of differences in rates of absence. Much of the non-medical absence recorded was still related to the same economic and social factors noted in the nineteenth century, poor-quality and overcrowded housing, low income, large families, lack of parental care or interest in education and gender expectations. The ‘incapacity rate’ of girls aged 12 and over was 25% more than for boys of the same age and if one excluded all medical causes, their absence rate was 40% higher than the boys, mainly due to ‘illness [in the family] and domestic work at home’, this being greater where there were 3 or more children in the family. He concluded, ‘There can be no question as to domestic and other responsibilities being placed on older girls, especially those belonging to large families or who attended schools in poor districts, or who had parents who had low standards.’<sup>762</sup>

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<sup>760</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

<sup>761</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>762</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.3, 10.

Interestingly, Bransby found that the children of working mothers had up to 25% less absence for medical and non-medical reasons than those with mothers at home. Clearly a working mother had a strong incentive to send her child to school as having a sick child at home at short notice would demand some sort of childcare arrangement – Bransby thought that sometimes working mothers sent children to school when they were unfit.<sup>763</sup>

Some of this is expected, but one of Bransby's conclusions from the examination of individual data belies the notion that school attendance problems were associated only with a minority of children. 'Practically no children were never absent; many were frequently absent.'<sup>764</sup> He found that only 20 % of children aged over 7 had a low level of absence (0-9 half-days) in the year, and only 17% of girls over 12 managed this relatively 'good' level of attendance. Conversely, 'many children were absent for long periods'; he found that 26% of young children under 7 were absent for 60 half-days or more, that is about one-sixth of their school year. For older children the rate was lower, but still 12% of boys and 15-20% of girls missed the equivalent of nearly a day a week of their schooling.<sup>765</sup>

What were Bransby's recommendations as a result of this study? Surprisingly, perhaps, he considered 'holidaying with parents' to be a justifiable reason for absence from school. Despite his findings about the low level of absence recorded by children of working mothers, he registered concern at the 'social, psychological and emotional effects when the mother goes to work.'<sup>766</sup> Perhaps both of these comments were a reflection of his own class assumptions about what were 'good' reasons for children to attend or be absent from school. He was more concerned about the absences associated with poverty or poor family circumstances. His prescription was for more home visiting and 'encouraging a pride in good attendance' with much more communication with the home, so that parents not just children were congratulated when attendance was good and notified when it was bad. After this, he admitted that 'a hard core of difficult cases

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<sup>763</sup> Ibid., p.9.

<sup>764</sup> Ibid., p.8.

<sup>765</sup> Ibid., p.8.

<sup>766</sup> Ibid., p.10.

[remained], which already receive considerable attention from the school welfare service, [and] which resort to every device to disguise the real reasons for absences.’<sup>767</sup> Beyond this, Bransby’s recommendation was to focus on the individual circumstances of the child, through the building up of absence records and notes by those in contact with the family, which help in ‘throwing light on the home background’. The aim of this was to ‘show where and how domiciliary care should be provided’.<sup>768</sup> This individual case work approach to family support was typical of much local authority social work in the post-War period. Bransby’s work is interesting in that he approached it initially as a medical survey, but his data showed that even ‘medical’ absence varied on the basis of socio-economic factors and family circumstances. For this reason, his eventual recommendations were concerned at least equally with the non-medical causes of absence. In addition, he made no mention in his paper of the law on school attendance or the use of sanctions such as warnings or prosecution of parents – while recognising that some parents, the ‘hard core’ would not co-operate with the authorities, the process of giving attention, encouragement and support to families was seen as the appropriate response to truancy.

Even though Bransby’s study post-dates the limit of this thesis by nearly a decade, its findings shed light on the state of school attendance in working-class districts around the time of the Second World War. The most obvious conclusion is that little had changed in terms of school attendance – we see the same issues at the end of the period as at the start. Clearly poor attendance was having less impact on the aggregate figures than in the nineteenth century, but at the local level, non-attendance was still a serious hindrance to the schooling of working-class children and not just confined to a small minority. Whilst certain districts might contain a proportion of ‘the worst offenders’, occasional absence from school was still widespread in some working-class communities.

Truancy and non-attendance can therefore be understood as a ‘double-aspect’ phenomenon, with the majority of children taking some time off and a minority engaging

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<sup>767</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>768</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

in serious absenteeism. The majority of working-class families were prepared to honour the state's requirement for regular attendance, but this was often still conditional upon there not being another demand for the child's time which was preferable in the short-term. The trend noted in Bransby's study amongst the better-off families to take children out of school for holidays reflects the fact that schooling requires persistent and long-term investment of the child's time and effort and this is not always preferable over immediate benefits to the whole family, whatever its social and economic circumstances. School attendance had become a social norm for working-class families well before the 1930s, but it was one which could still come under pressure from other family priorities – and perhaps this would always be the case. The problem for the enforcement agencies was to make sure the incentives for going to school and the sanctions against absenteeism were sufficient to weigh in favour of attendance for as many families as possible. By the 1930s, the acceptance of an absence rate of approximately 10% overall masked quite worrying levels of irregular attendance by a majority of children, according to Bransby's study, and this suggests that in the view of the majority of families there was still an 'acceptable' level of absence. Despite the improvements in the quality of elementary education since 1900, from the families' point of view, the type and standard of education provided for the mass of working-class children did not much affect their life chances. This is reflected in the decision of the majority of working-class children to leave school at the earliest opportunity even after the introduction of free secondary education for all after the Second World War. There's a sense in which schooling was the 'original' welfare provision, on which all later services for the masses were built. It was supposed to provide a social good, and one which all would come to recognise as valuable, but in fact, the authorities had recognised from the start that legal enforcement was needed. That it was still needed after 60 years of universal state elementary education was a surprise to some, but Bransby's study demonstrates the persistence of what might be termed 'pragmatic' and 'short-term' family decision-making in the 1920s and 30s.<sup>769</sup>

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<sup>769</sup> NASWE SAONA Conference – this was recognised by John Stevenson in his speech to the 1923 Conference, 'there are people ... who glibly talk about the ... day when the office of School Attendance Officer will be abolished. .. Notwithstanding the great fall in the number of prosecutions there abides a very appreciable number of negligent parents who will continue to need the closest vigilance.'

At the same time, the research had highlighted the concentration of more persistent absenteeism in particular districts and schools. The pinpointing of the neighbourhood factor is particularly helpful, yet needs to be unpicked. What was it about a 'bad neighbourhood' that reduced the attendance of children at school? Possibly, the conjunction of social problems in particular families – soon to be labelled 'problem families' – needs to be considered.<sup>770</sup> Such a family had been identified as likely to contain a large number of children, with a low income and poor housing, and a mother who perhaps could not cope, or did not exercise discipline over her children, or had little interest in them and their education. Perhaps such neighbourhoods concentrated all those families with the most challenging needs together and so engendered a culture of 'not caring' – about schooling, about the law or about authority in general. The root of this concentration must have been housing policy – for the study showed that where families of the same socio-economic class had moved to new estates or even where they were in mixed residential areas, school attendance was better, the cultural influences towards schooling more benign. It needs to be remembered that housing policy at the time may have accentuated the geographical separation of aspirational working-class families from those with low expectations for themselves and their children, since Birmingham City Council had 'no organised policy of looking after poor families' and they often rejected tenants with poor payment records for new council housing.<sup>771</sup> Thus stable, 'better-organised' families, with reliable habits, had more chance of moving into new houses and away from the slums.

## Conclusions

By 1939, it is fair to say that the problem of truancy had been redefined, at least in part. It had become absorbed within wider welfare considerations. Attendance rates were no longer seen on their own as a matter of priority for the Board of Education or for local authorities. School attendance was not used after 1919 in the calculation of funding for

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<sup>770</sup> Women's Group on Public Welfare, *Our Towns, a Close-Up: A Study Made in 1939-42 with Certain Recommendations by the Hygiene Committee of the Women's Group on Public Welfare (in Association with National Council Service)* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), pp.xiii-xiv, 51.

<sup>771</sup> Briggs, *Birmingham*, p.235.

schools, since this was based on school rolls for each local authority and there was less attention paid generally to statistics of attendance as a focus for action. Instead, attendance was treated as a sign of family problems, or socio-economic need. The realisation that children's needs – physical, mental and emotional – were varied and the growing interest in the home and family had drawn official attention away from the issue of merely enforcing the law on compulsory attendance. Instead truancy was treated as an indicator of other problems, such as sickness, family instability or poverty. Some children previously considered to be truanting or wilfully absent, with or without the knowledge of their parents, were now labelled in other ways, as needing help of various kinds and therefore subject to specific remedial activity by agencies outside the school attendance department.

However, the law on compulsory attendance remained in force both at national level and in local bye-laws. As the century progressed and the school leaving age was raised (in 1918 and again in 1947), more adolescents came within the remit of the attendance officer. The sanctions were in name at least, still the same – the home visit, the warning, the summons, the court attendance order. And behind the legal framework, the enforcement system – of monitoring, persuading and chivvying, in fact everything short of prosecution, continued. Some attendance officers experienced frustration at their lack of 'clout' to punish recalcitrant or distracted parents. Others thought that every family with a truanting child was susceptible to welfare and support – that if all obstacles were removed, parents would realise the benefits of schooling for their child. Despite the new 'welfare' face of attendance enforcement, it appears to have been no more successful in compelling the 'hard core' truants to attend than the old punitive methods – and they at least involved less intrusive enquiry into family circumstances.

The reluctance of the authorities to prosecute was a form of prioritising on their part also. Enforcement of school attendance had always demanded significant resources and in the 1920s and 30s, resources for education were squeezed. Welfare provision for children who were in school was certainly a more attractive focus for spending than punishing the parents of those who were not attending. Thus, the absorption of attendance monitoring

within welfare departments recognised both a change of priorities for spending as well as a reduction in the resources going directly to enforcement. The ‘acceptance’ of a level of non-attendance of approximately 10% by most local authorities may be seen as complacency. From another point of view, it may be simply have been due to their recognising that the impact they could make on truancy or non-attendance was limited if it was treated as a compliance issue in isolation from other social or economic problems. Perhaps this represents a cultural compact of sorts between the authorities and families, one which was not seriously challenged until the advent of Ofsted, testing and school league tables in the 1980s made attendance once again the focus of official attention.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

This thesis has analysed two sides of the ‘truancy’ coin – the objects of the law, truanting children and their families, and those responsible for enforcing the law, schools, local authorities and their agents. On both sides, attitudes to schooling and to enforcement changed significantly in the period 1880-1939. By the turn of the century, the majority of working-class families accepted the obligation to send their children to school regularly. Local authorities together with schools moved to less punitive or remedial approaches to the problem where it persisted. But underneath the activity of enforcement and the responses of children and parents, there were important continuities as well. A small minority of persistent absentees remained a problem and a much larger number of children continued to truant on an occasional or intermittent basis, on their own initiative, with parental approval or at the parents’ behest. Local authorities still retained their essential policing role in relation to the law on school attendance, which sat somewhat uneasily alongside the development of their new child welfare role emerging in the inter-war period.

### **Families, school attendance habits and the influence of neighbourhood**

In work undertaken in the 1980s, historians Steve Humphries and Phil Gardner suggested that truancy or the choosing of an alternative private school represented a sort of solidarity amongst working-class communities in the face of legal compulsion. John Hurt has suggested a common antipathy to schooling lay beneath the surface of conformity to the law, which persisted well into the twentieth century. The view that many working-class communities had their own distinct culture, often completely isolated from middle-class precepts, is not contested. But it is difficult to speak of one ‘working-class’ culture; families were very varied in their outlook and habits, even within fairly cohesive communities.<sup>772</sup>

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<sup>772</sup> Rose, *Intellectual Life*, pp.83-91, 172-76.

There is no evidence from this study of several localities that working-class parents were expressing any sort of ‘community feeling’ or solidarity with class interests when they failed to get their children to attend school. As chapter 4 showed, once enforcement was put in place, most parents and children conformed to the law within a short period of time. By the early twentieth century, it appears that the majority of working-class families and their communities accepted the ideal of the ‘schooled child’.<sup>773</sup> Two events seem to have provoked a significant improvement in school attendance – the ending of school fees in 1891 and the introduction of local education authorities from 1902. Free schooling certainly removed an impediment for the poorest families and new local education authorities brought with them more resources for schools and a more efficient pursuit of those not conforming to the law. Those who did flout the law were generally the poor, the careless and those with little regard for authority generally. The evidence in chapter 3 confirms the precariousness of working-class family life. Parental attitudes may have varied, but the evidence from chapter 4 seems to point to a widespread instrumentality in relation to attendance amongst working-class families rather than any common attitude of antipathy. Whether the underlying attitude of particular parents was positive or negative to schooling for their children was not the most significant issue in determining regularity of attendance – more immediate issues such as family crises and economic needs, or a pattern of family life in which there was little order and regularity were more important factors. The gap in understanding about the relative importance of schooling between middle-class local authority members and working-class parents was explored in chapter 3.<sup>774</sup> Where parents of truants responded to the enforcement agencies with excuses, deception or a quick ‘flit’, this was often in the context of the power-relations between the classes and the need to extricate oneself quickly from a difficult situation. The opposite reaction – deference, politeness and promises to co-operate – can be seen in the same light, as simply the means by which the parent came away from a difficult encounter with a bit more money or a bit more time to meet the law’s requirement.

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<sup>773</sup> Humphries, "Child Labor: Lessons from the Historical Experience of Today's Industrial Economies", p. 192.

<sup>774</sup> Pages 95-103.

The only evidence of any sort of ‘solidarity’ amongst working-class parents came over the issue of the leaving age, which in some places did provoke concerted resistance, mainly in places where child labour opportunities were available at a young age. The evidence of parental resistance not to school attendance per se, but to the *extension* of schooling beyond the age at which children traditionally went to work again underlines the economic basis for the incidence of much truancy, but its persistence well into the twentieth century suggests also the influence of cultural patterns on family behaviour and the transmission of those patterns over generations. The evidence from chapters 5 and 6 shows large numbers of children left school at the earliest opportunity for work during wartime and in the inter-war period, despite a general improvement in family incomes during that period. However, none of this is really surprising – the vicissitudes of the working-class family life-cycle had been charted by Rowntree and many others at the start of the century and these would hardly have been forgotten in a single generation. Thus even for many comparatively comfortable working-class families, to have an extra income coming into the house would continue to be valued over the extra year or two’s schooling of a child, even when the family was not living ‘on the margin’.

The evidence of a revival in parental pressure for early leaving during the First World War suggests that parents were eager to grab opportunities for their children to work rather than stay at school, even though the real wages available to the average family between 1914-18 were better than they had been for a generation. However, the War brought with it very unusual circumstances and the insecurities of family life were also perhaps magnified. By contrast, in the decade before 1914, school attendance levels were high, even though most local authorities had virtually abandoned prosecutions for non-attendance. The positive incentives to attend school, better buildings, more teachers, a more varied curriculum, as well as reward schemes were accompanied by attendance rates approaching 90% in both urban and rural areas. This seems to counter the idea that there was an underlying lack of commitment to schooling by working-class parents. However, the evidence from the wartime years also suggests that this support could be undermined by unusual social disruption or major changes in the market for children’s labour.

The conclusion that school attendance during the period 1880-1939 was linked to families' socio-economic circumstances is not surprising – but it is not correct to ascribe truancy simply to family poverty. As Chapter 4 showed, many other factors in a family's circumstances had an influence over truancy, not least the 'neighbourhood factor'. To a certain extent, neighbourhood is a proxy for socio-economic status, since slums in particular crowded together people of similar circumstances, and those who could afford to get out of them moved away. However, the fact that one working-class district exhibited more truancy than another is puzzling given the variety of family circumstances which would pertain within one district and the mixture of occupational patterns of the breadwinners of those families. How in practice could there be a specific influence attributed to a neighbourhood which would affect children's attendance at school? The Coventry evidence in chapter 4 showed that there was great variety in the occupational status of working-class families in the neighbourhoods from which most of the truants came, including some with fathers who would be considered skilled workers. Little attention has been paid to the 'small worlds' in which many working-class people moved. Booth's work shows that, even in London, working-class families often lived and worked within a very confined district. To be known to local traders and neighbours and to have family living nearby were important guarantees of credit and practical help when needed. The importance of the neighbourhood as a factor affecting school attendance was illustrated by the evidence reviewed in chapter 7, in the study by Dr Bransby from 1947. Bransby compared new housing estates, mixed districts and slum areas and found that the neighbourhood was a more significant influence on attendance than the socio-economic status of the family. This in turn suggests that housing in urban areas probably had a significant effect on truancy and other social problems, since social segregation was mirrored in the 'hierarchy' of local schools. Overcrowded housing in many working-class urban areas meant children's lives were lived largely on the streets – under the common influence of all the families in the district. For parents, the local neighbourhood could be more important for one's 'credit' in terms of future support than fear of the attendance officer's visits or even a fine.<sup>775</sup> The threat of penalties under the law as well as positive

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<sup>775</sup> Dayus, *Girl from Hockley*, pp.13-14.

changes, such as free schooling, building improvements and better teachers may have induced conformity in the short term, but may not have changed the ‘default’ attitude of parents or children to schooling in particular neighbourhoods between 1880 and 1939. Bransby’s study also indicates that ‘conditional’ attitudes towards school attendance amongst a significant proportion of working-class parents in poor districts were still widespread by 1947. Family decisions about children’s attendance depended on the perceived needs of the family or the pressure on the parent in a busy household as against the obligation to be at school.

### **Local authorities – a new assessment of their role in raising school attendance levels**

Historians have tended to equivocate over the role of local authorities in the gradual improvements seen in school attendance during the nineteenth century.<sup>776</sup> Local authorities have also been portrayed as lacking conviction and commitment to the enforcement of school attendance.<sup>777</sup> The evidence of this study shows that local authorities, especially urban school boards, contributed significantly to improving school attendance levels through their enforcement activities. The motivations of school board and attendance committee members certainly varied – from the desire to spread the benefits of elementary education to the pragmatic concern to ensure local rates were spent to good effect. More than anything, the belief that children would be better disciplined and prevented from causing mayhem on the streets drove the middle-classes to support the enforcement of regular attendance. In rural areas, the impact of attendance monitoring and enforcement was more limited, but not always for lack of support for the principle of school attendance. Gradually the attendance department became an established bureaucratic function within local government, producing information on working-class neighbourhoods, especially about poor housing conditions, levels of unemployment and child health, which increased middle-class awareness of social

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<sup>776</sup> For instance, Marsden, "Social Environment", p.199, 209; Pressley, "Half-Time in Bradford", p.14.

<sup>777</sup> Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, p.202.

problems. In London at least, the information generated fed directly into Booth's social survey.<sup>778</sup>

Despite the view of some historians that the 1902 Education Act was essentially a conservative measure, the replacement of school boards and attendance committees by local education authorities can be seen as wholly beneficial for attendance in elementary schools. Chapter 5 shows how the introduction of new education authorities, particularly in rural areas, galvanised enforcement agencies into action and standardised the approach of school attendance officers to absence. With greater resources and the advantages of a supporting bureaucracy, enforcement was carried out more systematically. The result was an impressive increase in regular attendance during the first decade of the twentieth century. Attendance monitoring had further significance in the development of local authorities' delivery of the new welfare agenda for children and families which emerged in the decade before the First World War. There was increasingly an acknowledgement that truancy could be linked to the health and physical welfare of the child. The awareness of the physical and mental needs of children for whom the ordinary day school did not suffice prompted both the provision of special education and wider welfare provision such as free school meals. The process of monitoring families over attendance also provided a vehicle for the expansion of bureaucratic activity associated with the new functions of local government in child health and feeding. There were therefore intimate links between the existing 'policing' role over attendance and the way in which new welfare services for children were implemented. The established role necessarily affected the way in which the services were delivered by local authorities and received by parents and children.

The new LEAs resorted less to the courts in cases of truancy, but instead invested in better systems for monitoring families which then supported the introduction of new services such as medical inspection, free school meals and juvenile employment advice. In other ways too, attendance enforcement had laid the foundations for a much more

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<sup>778</sup> Rosemary O'Day and David Englander, *Mr Charles Booth's Inquiry: Life and Labour of the People of London Reconsidered* (London: Hambledon Press, 1993), pp.43-44.

active role by local authorities in the protection of children's welfare. The process of enforcement brought middle-class local authority members into contact increasingly with the homeless, the neglected and the abused child. The resources available to local authorities to respond to the needs of such children were very limited – mainly the residential industrial school. This, together with the truant schools and day industrial schools, provided what was supposed to be a punitive and reformatory environment for children whose parents could not control them or ensure they attend school regularly. As other provision was made within the mainstream school to meet the needs of the backward or malnourished child, the need for day industrial schools diminished, but the use of residential industrial schools for truanting children persisted into the 1920s. The reasons for this are closely allied to the precepts in the Children Act of 1908, which still viewed the institution as an effective means for reforming young people's behaviour and a counter to the influences of an inadequate home.

To a certain extent, as chapter 6 demonstrates, the First World War can be seen as an interruption to these changes in the role of school attendance monitoring and the treatment of truancy. Local authorities reverted to more punitive approaches as absenteeism rose. Restrictions on early leaving gradually imposed since the 1890s were more or less abandoned under pressure from parents for young people to fill the labour shortage of wartime. In rural areas, even where local authorities tried to stem the tide of requests from parents and employers, they received scant support from the Board of Education and eventually had to relax their exemption standards. At the same time, there was a general 'patriotic' impulse even amongst voluntary workers and care committees, who appreciated and accepted the attractions of well-paid unskilled war work for school leavers. If the 1918 Education Act produced little of the educational improvement hoped for by educationists, in the realm of school attendance its impact was significant. The Act marked the end of variable school leaving ages, including half-time schooling, which had been the cause of much frustration for attendance officers and many prosecutions where the parents had sought to 'bend the rules' to allow their children to go to work at the earliest opportunity.

By the early 1920s, attendance levels had been restored to near pre-war levels – indeed, it could be argued that the ‘rarity’ of truancy then helped to shift attitudes towards truants and their families. Persistent truancy was coming to be seen as so abnormal that it could be a signal of deeper problems in the family. It was also the case that once high levels of regular attendance had been established in elementary schools, LEAs could turn their attention to marginal groups, and there was certainly increasing concern about the schooling of gypsy, traveller and canal boat children in the inter-war period. Such changes tended to ‘pathologise’ truancy in the eyes of the authorities. The gradual change in LEA perceptions of truancy came as a result of the interaction between new welfare responsibilities, the influence of voluntary organisations on local government and the impact of new ideas about child psychology on ideas about the family.

As chapter 7 shows, these changes did not pass the school attendance department by, but ‘welfare’ approaches supplemented the policing role rather than replaced it. New professional groups also started to intrude onto the territory of family contact which had been the preserve of the attendance officer. The interaction between more therapeutic approaches to absenteeism and the continuing process of policing and warning led to an uncomfortable mix of roles within attendance departments, which remained unresolved by 1939. Although attendance monitoring had been the springboard for delivery of the new services for children, attendance departments were increasingly sidelined from ‘professional’ social work with families. The enforcement of compulsory attendance had been the most significant early state intervention into family life, but it was succeeded by many others in the twentieth century. However, there was no significant reduction in absenteeism in the period after 1920, which suggests that although therapeutic or ‘social work’ approaches to truancy may have assisted families and children with serious problems, they were not focused primarily on improving regular school attendance.

### **Learning lessons – truancy past and present**

The evidence presented in this study confirms the importance of historical perspectives on contemporary social problems. After 1909, there was a level of absenteeism, at about

10% of average attendance, which was not apparently susceptible to reduction, despite further improvements both in the quality of school provision and in family incomes during the ensuing thirty-year period to 1939. What is even more surprising is the lack of any significant impact on school attendance from the improvements in family incomes, welfare and child health which have taken place in the seven decades since then. The fact that the Government, the National Audit Office, LEAs and researchers alike are still asking the same questions about truancy today suggests the problem is complex and unlikely to respond to one type of approach, whether punitive or remedial. The search for the 'causes of truancy' having proved so elusive to social science, it is perhaps salutary to take a backwards look in order to understand why so many of today's initiatives have had little impact on the rate of absenteeism. Two features of importance relating to working-class family life have been identified:-

- i) The persistence of a 'hard core' of parents whose habits, attitudes or circumstances contribute to poor attendance by their children at school.
- ii) A general attitude amongst a wider group of parents that 'family comes first' when school priorities clash with family needs – this might apply just as much to the taking of holidays in term time as to keeping a child off school to assist with younger siblings.

Other issues are of diminished importance but still exert some influence. The cultural expectation that working-class children will leave school and work at the earliest legal opportunity is still evident in the numbers of young people who leave school each year before completing any qualifications and by our relatively modest rate of post-16 continuation into full-time education or training, compared with continental nations.<sup>779</sup> A further challenge in this regard will emerge when the age of compulsory education is raised to 18 from 2013 onwards.<sup>780</sup>

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<sup>779</sup> Department for Education and Skills, *14-19 Education and Skills* (HMSO, Feb. 2005), pp.16-18.

<sup>780</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6254833.stm> (cited 12.01.2007) 'School leaving age set to be 18'.

Beyond this, the research confirms the importance of the ‘neighbourhood’ factor as an influence over average school attendance rates in the past. How relevant is this to today’s circumstances? The slums were eventually swept away to be replaced by neighbourhoods with less cohesion and less need for people to mix with each other. Yet neighbourhoods still reflect socio-economic status, largely because of the divide between areas of social and private housing, often served by different schools. This is not to say that individual schools cannot make a difference to their attendance rates, but it is always against a background of ‘pre-existing’ circumstances in their catchment area. The impact of socio-economic circumstances on all indicators of educational achievement, including attendance, is well-known, but the particular role played by smaller local neighbourhoods in reinforcing or reducing rates of attendance may account for some of the differences seen between schools which apparently serve comparable areas. Even more interesting is the suggestion from the Bransby evidence in Chapter 7 that children from poor families attended more regularly at schools where they were with children from a mixture of social backgrounds. In this case, the social mix of the school was countering any neighbourhood influence rather than reinforcing it. The neighbourhood factor deserves attention by modern-day researchers seeking to understand the mechanisms by which patterns of regular school attendance can be better reinforced through school culture and peer pressure rather than by direct intervention. Taken a step further, one might conclude that the policy of ‘neighbourhood comprehensives’, endorsed by governments over the past 40 years, may have contributed to the problem of poor school attendance, which is more prevalent in schools in poorer areas, by reinforcing the social segregation of children in local schools. Recent experiments with ‘lottery’ allocation of school places or the use of ‘fair banding’ in popular city academies seek to remedy this by mixing children randomly or ensuring a ‘balanced’ mix of children based on prior attainment level. Since children from poorer districts tend on average to have lower prior attainment, this means the school retains a wider social mix. It will be interesting to see if these processes lead to better attendance as well as higher levels of academic attainment.<sup>781</sup>

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<sup>781</sup> Brighton and Hove City Council, *Secondary Admissions Review* (No date); available from <http://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/index.cfm?request=c1144627> (cited 17.09.2007); Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, *Advice on Admissions* (26 September 2005) available from [http://www.specialistschools.org.uk/uploads/documents/AdmissionsSept2005\\_211.doc](http://www.specialistschools.org.uk/uploads/documents/AdmissionsSept2005_211.doc) (cited 17.09.2007).

Unfortunately, some of the insights offered by this historical research point to deep-seated issues related to housing, class and income levels as well as persistent family cultures underlying the problem of truancy. These cannot easily be addressed by the range of activities open to local authorities. However, the historical record also indicates that practical progress *was* made where parents were presented with sufficient pressure, or incentive, to support good attendance by their children. This is not to ignore the role of children themselves and the incentives which are needed to draw them into school as well. Strategies for improving school attendance over recent years have drawn on the historical precedents, with the increased use of penalties and even ‘shaming’ of parents who have repeatedly ignored the demands of the law. However, there has been less willingness by government to examine the weaknesses in local authority bureaucratic systems which hindered the effectiveness of school attendance enforcement in the past, some of which have continued to the present. These include the communication ‘gap’ between schools and attendance departments, problems with the accurate reporting of data on attendance and inconsistent application of the penalties for truants and their parents, all of which were the subject of complaints by school attendance officers in the early twentieth century.

Chapters 5 to 7 cover previously unexplored territory in the history of local government and the development of services for children. Chapter 7 in particular highlights the ways in which new branches of children’s work cut across the earlier role of school attendance officers, challenging their conception of their work but at the same time offering little in the way of an alternative. In English local authorities, the work of school attendance enforcement remained for most of the post-1945 period completely separate from the social work undertaken by Children’s Departments. This was a separation based on the professional status of social workers as against the non-professional status of most school attendance officers. School attendance departments were also cut off both geographically and bureaucratically from school managers, who were responsible for attendance yet reliant on attendance officers for following up individual truants. The roots of these ‘separations’ can be seen clearly in the development of attendance enforcement from its

earliest days. In contrast, some continental nations have developed the concept of the 'social pedagogue' which combines the role of school manager with family social worker to address the issue of truancy in the home and at school at the same time. This role sprang from the need to address widespread family breakdown in the wake of Second World War devastation and disruption.<sup>782</sup> By contrast in Britain, a process of accretion has led to the uncomfortable combination of policing and social work in the role of the Education Welfare Officer, which was germinating in the 1930s.

The new Behaviour and Attendance Consultants introduced into schools from 2004 have to some extent started to address these issues, which for so long have been tied up with the control of resources within local authorities, the status and training of education welfare officers and the division of responsibility for attendance between schools and local authority attendance departments. On the one hand, the future role of the education welfare service looks somewhat uncertain, in the light of increasing devolution of local authority functions and resources to school level. On the other hand, there has been a recent move to bring more co-ordination to local authority services for families, children and schools by merging them into single departments and ensuring authorities have one 'plan' for them all. This policy has been mirrored by the creation of the new Department for Children, Schools and Families. This may offer a better way to integrate school attendance enforcement at local authority level with other support systems for families of truants whilst at the same time meeting the needs of schools to ensure children attend regularly.

This historical analysis of truancy and non-attendance has demonstrated the close connections between what is often seen as a marginal topic (truancy and school attendance) and wider issues in education and child welfare; in relation to the period 1900-39, no previous historical work has been done on this topic. More than this, the research has shown the links between schooling, attendance and many of the central

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<sup>782</sup> Haydn Davies Jones, *The Social Pedagogues in Western Europe - Some Implications for European Interprofessional Care* (August 2000); available from [www.childrenuk.co.uk/chaug/aug2000/social\\_pedagogues](http://www.childrenuk.co.uk/chaug/aug2000/social_pedagogues) (cited 15.06.2007).

themes of development in the twentieth-century welfare state, notably the role of the state in the care and upbringing of children. This is an issue currently at the heart of government concern; efforts to reach the socially-excluded and change poor parenting habits are at the core of the Government's strategy in terms of pre-school and early-years education and in its policies to control disaffected youth by means of ASBOs and parenting orders. This research has pointed up several issues of importance, notably the influence of local delivery on national policy, the process by which families accept or reject state interventions and the important connections between social and educational objectives. More than anything, I hope it has reinforced the value of historical perspectives on social and educational problems and shown the need to understand the roots of our current approaches to such problems in inherited administrative systems and long-established cultural patterns.

Summary of Legal Changes related to School Attendance and Truancy pre-1939

<b>Legal Change</b>	<b>Effect on Work of Attendance Officers</b>
1870 Elementary Education (Forster's) Act	Permitted the appointment of enforcement officers – mainly in large cities and new industrial areas.
1876 Elementary Education (Sandon) Act	Provided for enforcement of school attendance where bye-laws passed – more appointments made. Also provided for school authorities to take cases to court for committal of truants and children in danger of offending to truant schools or industrial schools. Could also build and operate these schools themselves.
1880 Elementary Education (Mundella) Act	Compelled all local authorities to pass attendance bye-laws and appoint enforcement officers.
1893, 1899, 1900 Elementary Education Acts	Raised age of leaving school from 10 to 13 effectively in most places, although half-time still from age 12.
1889 Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act	Passed after campaign by NSPCC – alerted attendance officers to report cases of cruelty or neglect.
1893 Elementary Education (Blind and Deaf Children) Act 1899 Education (Defective and Epileptic Children) Act 1913 Mental Deficiency Act	Children with additional physical needs or learning difficulties had to be assessed and given special (usually separate) educational provision by the local authority. Attendance officers were required to identify and report on cases of children needing special education.
1903 Employment of Children Act	Legislation to restrict child employment, such as street trading, but permissive and local authority had to pass bye-laws. Attendance officers to police these.
1902 Education (Balfour) Act	Reorganised all local elementary schooling under the control of county and borough councils. School boards abolished and all staff contracts ended. In urban areas, attendance officers were usually re-engaged. In many rural areas, the part-time officers were replaced by new younger full-timers.
1906 Education (Provision of Meals) Act	Permitted local education authorities to provide free or subsidised school meals with costs covered by a half-penny rate. Families applying for subsidies or free meals were assessed according to need by attendance officers and/or school medical staff.
1907 Education (Administrative Provisions) Act	Set up the school medical service with inspections at 3 key points in elementary school career. This was followed by the setting up of clinics to treat children, mainly in urban areas. Led to campaign to eliminate head lice and other common childhood illnesses. Attendance officers policed the exclusion of children for 'dirty heads' and prosecution of parents if they were not treated.
1908 Children Act	Major revision to criminal law relating to children – established separate juvenile courts and probation for reform of child criminals.
1910 Juvenile Employment Act	Local Education Authorities obliged to provide employment advice to children leaving elementary schools, usually via juvenile employment offices. Some authorities employed new officials to interview parents and children in the home or at school, record job choices and follow up afterwards to check on progress. Most relied on a committee of volunteers. This work was only rarely devolved to attendance officers.

APPENDIX A

1918 Education (Fisher) Act	Compulsory schooling for all children aged 5-14 and end of half-time schooling (implemented 1921). Also tightened laws on street trading with licensing of under-16s.
1921 Education Act	Placed a responsibility on LEAs for monitoring/enforcing attendance in private schools in their area.
1933 Children and Young Persons Act	Consolidating Act building on 1908 Children Act. Merged all reformatories and industrial schools under 'Approved Schools' with remit of reform and education. Covered cruelty to children, prevention of prostitution and begging and children in bars and pubs. LEAs given powers to control vagrancy where it was preventing children's schooling, and to make bye-laws for child employment and those in entertainment. Attendance officers involved in many aspects of policing and preparing reports for court on children in care of local authority or facing prosecution.

## The Measurement of School Attendance 1880-1939

### 1. The calculation of 'annual average attendance'

The figure used by the Education Department and its successor, the Board of Education, to measure the attendance of children at elementary school was known as 'annual average attendance'. The formula for calculating this statistic was set out by the Board of Education in its 1905 Annual Report:-

The "Average Number of Scholars on Registers" for any school is the average of the numbers on the registers at the end of the first, second, third, and fourth quarters of the School Year; and the "Average Attendance" is the average number in attendance at each meeting of the School, excluding attendances which do not count for Grant (Article 13 of 1902 or 1903 Code). The total in either case is the sum of the averages for the different schools...

*(Board of Education Statistics of Public Education, 1905, Appendix F, p.liv).*

The Code for 1919 explained 'average annual attendance' thus:-

The "average attendance" of a school or department for any period is the quotient of the total number of attendances made during that period divided by the number of meetings during that period.' (Section 46 (a)).

A school had to count a minimum of 400 'sessions' (half-days) though many would have had more – possibly up to 450 sessions in a year. The average then was based on the actual number of sessions in the particular school year. A child could not be counted in the figures for grant to the school if it had not made the required attendance at 250 sessions. However, such children's attendance *were* included in the figures collected from schools by local authorities on a monthly basis to be collated for the year end statistics required by the Education Department or Board of Education. These are the figures used in the thesis as the basis for comparison of attendance rates.

### 2. The removal of under 5s from the figures

Until 1907, children aged from 3 -13 could qualify for grant in a public elementary school. After 1893, and the end of the annual examination of children in elementary schools, the government grant depended primarily on annual average attendance, though there were separate grants for 'class subjects' taught to older children. National figures in this thesis come from the overall statistics for ages 3-13 (14 from 1900) up to 1907 and for ages 5-14 after that date. By 1907, the number of children aged 3- 5 in public elementary schools was small and their removal would thus not have affected the overall figures significantly. However, the gradual decline in the numbers of children in this age group in elementary schools must have helped improve overall attendance rates, as 3-5 year olds were the group most susceptible to infection and weather-related absence.

## Average Annual Attendance by County for 1882 and 1899

## APPENDIX C

County	No. on register	Av. In attendance	1882 %	1899			
<b>By Region</b>							
<b>Home Counties</b>							
London	492973	379707	77.0	80.71			
Berkshire	36329	27783	76.5	85.34			
Bedford	25452	18757	73.7	86.82			
Sussex	71534	52541	73.4	83.09			
Kent	108680	79684	73.3	82.51			
Hampshire*	82047	60045	73.2	82.86	* Southampton/ Isle of Wight figs. for 1899		
Middlesex	43931	32112	73.1	81.77			
Essex	89024	65070	73.1	83.40			
Herts	34394	25040	72.8	82.84			
Bucks	32016	23226	72.5	83.72			
Surrey	69413	44419	64.0	80.95			
	1085793	808384	74.5				
<b>Midlands</b>							
Oxfordshire	30718	23244	75.7	85.30			
Rutland	3667	2681	73.1	84.68			
Warwicks	123089	89840	73.0	83.41			
Leics	60810	44315	72.9	82.76			
Salop	40119	28832	71.9	81.29			
Northants	49019	34535	70.5	82.96			
Lincolnshire	76868	53942	70.2	80.99			
Notts	68317	46851	68.6	80.70			
	452607	324240	71.6				
<b>Severn</b>							
Hereford	19224	14305	74.4	79.71			
Worcs	60743	44249	72.8	84.88			
Gloucs	82919	59884	72.2	82.26			
	162886	118438	72.7				
<b>East Anglia</b>							
Hunts	10423	7959	76.4	82.12			
Norfolk	69520	51313	73.8	83.43			
Suffolk	57856	42465	73.4	83.63			
Cambs	31674	23038	72.7	81.81			
	169473	124775	73.6				
<b>Rural North</b>							
Westmoreland	10645	7986	75.0	84.80			
Durham	154406	112720	73.0	79.60			
Northumberland	68864	49534	71.9	82.08			
Cumberland	42433	30110	71.0	83.32			
	276348	200350	72.5				
<b>Indust. North</b>							
Cheshire	108691	78293	72.0	81.11			
Staffs	178003	126951	71.3	84.87			
Derbys	85941	60396	70.3	81.06			
Yorks	502016	350299	69.8	81.40			
Lancs	604493	419799	69.4	79.80			
	1479144	1035738	70.0				
<b>West Country/Wales</b>							
Dorset	31245	23288	74.5	81.96			
Devon	84357	62710	74.3	81.37			
Wilts	46135	33950	73.6	82.03			
Somerset	76336	56145	73.5	81.58			
Cornwall	50791	34769	68.5	78.36			
Monmouth	39144	26582	67.9	76.65			
Wales	244353	165000	67.5	76.92			
	572361	402444	70.3				

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