

The Haslington school strike.

Margaret Roberts spoke about the Haslington School Strike at the April meeting of Sandbach History Society.

She said that it would be assumed that the opening of the new school in Haslington in August 1913 would have been greeted with enthusiasm. VIPs arrived at the school for the opening and Colonel George Dixon, chairman of Cheshire County Council, ceremoniously unlocked the door of the school and unveiled a commemorative tablet in the hall. In his speech he pointed out that the school was to serve not only pupils in the village but further afield and was to be a model demonstration school with specialist facilities for woodwork, metalwork, domestic studies and rural studies to provide experience in teaching for the students of the County Training College at Crewe.

However, outside the school gates a demonstration was taking place. Local parents and children, with flags and banners, had made their way to the school, shouting and hissing at the dignitaries. The reason for this hostility was that Mr Owen, who had been headmaster of the temporary school, created while the new one was being built, had not been appointed to the headship of the new school and the parents were not happy.

Mrs Roberts said that there were major changes taking place in education at this time. The 1902 Education Act replaced school boards with Local Education Authorities, under county or borough councils, effectively centralising the control of education. They had the funding to build new schools, pay school teachers, ensure teachers were properly qualified and provide books and equipment.

The County Teacher Training College had opened in 1908 in the Mechanics Institute in Crewe and moved to new premises at Crewe Green in 1912. The college stressed the importance of practical training, with students spending four-or-five months direct involvement with pupils.

So why were the villagers up in arms, asked Mrs Roberts. By 1910, the population of Haslington had increased to such an extent that the church schools were unable to meet the educational needs of the area. As the Haslington C of E school managers had earlier refused to transfer their school to the local authority, the Education Committee gave notice of their intention to build a new Council school in collaboration with the County Training College. In the meantime, the Primitive Methodist Schoolroom was used as temporary accommodation.

In November 1910, at a meeting between the LEA and the church school managers, it was explained that the Education Committee proposed that the new school should house the older pupils whilst the church school would be used for the infants and juniors. Although the school managers could see the educational benefits of such a scheme, they pointed out that they had recently received a grant of almost £1,000 from

Chester Diocesan Education Association to carry out alterations and felt under an obligation to consult them about the proposed plans. The Association pointed out that the school foundation stipulated that the school should be for all ages and should remain a C of E school. The only course of action left to the local authority, therefore, was to continue the building of a new school.

John Merion Owen, aged 28, formerly head of Corwen School, was appointed headmaster of the temporary school. He settled into the school and the community and was held in high esteem. But before the new school was opened, he was asked to resign as head and take up a post as one of the county's emergency teachers.

The villagers - under the impression that he had been promised the headship of the new school - were furious and met to decide what action to take. They agreed that the Council should be informed that if Mr Owen was not reinstated, they would boycott the school and withdraw their children.

The education committee refused to comply with these demands. They had accepted Mr Owen's resignation and installed him as temporary head at Hassall Green school. Three candidates, all current headteachers, were interviewed for the headship at Haslington and Mr Alfred Hepplestone of Staveley in Derbyshire was appointed but was not able to take up his appointment until the start of the new term in September.

On the 16th August, 160 children and a large number of parents gathered outside the Methodist chapel and, under the banner saying "Justice for Mr Owen" marched down Crewe Road to the new school. Mrs Roberts described the scene outside the school, quoting the comments of some of the pupils who had spoken to the press and who obviously regarded it as a holiday and a bit of fun, being able to play truant with the full permission of their parents.

In the afternoon, in what the newspapers called a "pilgrimage of love" they set off for Hassall Green where they sang "For he's a jolly good fellow" when Mr Owen appeared at the front of the school.

Feelings continued to run high and at a public meeting, Dr Hodgson, chairman of Cheshire Education Committee, repeated that the head of the new school needed to have special qualifications and that Mr Owen had already moved to Hassall Green and would be given a permanent post when one arose. Mr Wilson, the deputy chairman, made matters worse by suggesting that the villagers should be grateful that the Committee had chosen Haslington for the new school and were paying two thirds of the costs.

On the first day only five pupils and four teachers had inhabited the new building. But in the second week more pupils trickled into school and, as the threat of prosecution for non-attendance became clear, the strike began to collapse. The education authority

invited parents to inspect the new school and bring their children with them. The children were so impressed and excited with the new facilities that they were keen to get back into school.

By the time Mr Hepplestone took up his new post in September the strike was over. But 42 of the parents sent their children to the C of E school or the school at Crewe Green, said Mrs Roberts.

An investigation by the National Union of Teachers found that Mr Owen's removal was not due to any failure on his part, or any bias on the part of the Education Authority, but due to the requirements of the Board of Education, that the headmasters of schools which took female students on teaching practice should be of considerable educational experience and should be married. Mrs Roberts said that, of course, young women wouldn't be in any danger whatsoever from a married man!

She concluded by saying that the sad situation came about due to the lack of foresight by the Education Committee regarding the unique circumstances of the new school and the requirements of the Board of Education. Had they appointed Mr Owen – an unmarried man - to the new school, the Board of Education would have refused to recognise the school as a teaching practice school with enormous cost implications. In order to save face, they effectively “botched” the situation by moving Mr Owen and making another appointment, thus angering the parents.

Ironically, she said, the Board of Education had recognised the temporary school for teaching practice purposes – but only as a stop-gap measure – which meant that female students did undertake their teaching practice under an unmarried man!

The Haslington school is now the Haslington Primary Academy and Nursery catering for pupils aged 2 to 11 years of age with 300 children on roll.

If you have any memories or things to share on the subject, Mrs Roberts would be pleased to hear from you. chair@fhsc.uk