

The first County school?

High Pavement School in Nottingham was founded in 1788 to combat the influence of the Anglicans, and is still going strong.



John Fox reports

The class of '95 – the school was co-educational until 1931

The overwhelming majority of schools which were established before 1870, and which are still in existence, were established by the Churches or by eleemosynary bodies and are now voluntary aided or controlled. But in Nottinghamshire there is a county school which is celebrating its bicentenary in 1988. It may well be the oldest county school in the United Kingdom.

High Pavement sixth-form college is a fascinating example of how education has changed during the past 200 years. It was initially established by the congregation of the Unitarian Church on High Pavement in the Lace Market area of Nottingham. The intention almost certainly was to combat the Anglican influence which was spreading in the city through the Bluecoat school which had been established earlier in the 18th century.

High Pavement school was established for the children of poor families of the congregation of the Unitarian Church, and its first pupils were admitted on January 26, 1788, the same day as the landing of Captain Arthur Phillip and the first settlers in New South Wales.

Over a period of 200 years, Australia and Sydney in particular have changed beyond all recognition. The same is probably true of High Pavement. But there are some features of the school which the founders would recognize and through which their principles have been continued.

The first teacher at High Pavement was Thomas Wheatcroft and the present college emblem includes three ears of wheat as a reminder of him.

The school was co-educational from the beginning, and the girls wore a brown ribbon in their bonnets. The school remained co-educational for its first 143 years, but was split in 1931 when the girls were provided with their own premises. High Pavement became a boys' grammar school under the 1944 Education Act, a status it retained for only 30 years before becoming a sixth-form college in 1974. Events seem to have gone full circle, as the sixth-form college is co-educational and thus fulfils the intentions of the original founders.

The Unitarian congregation had difficulty in funding the school, which was handed over to the Nottingham School Board in 1891 as "a higher grade and organized science school". It has been a county school ever since.

High Pavement has always enjoyed an enviable reputation among Nottinghamshire schools. Many men who are now active in a variety of walks of life look back at their school with great affection and respect.

But some of them were surprised when they attended a bicentenary reunion to realize that the girls who had preceded them as pupils take a similar pride in the school. One lady who had been admitted in 1914 took the Civil Service arithmetic examination at the age of 56 and scored 100 per cent. She still attributes her success to the quality of teaching she received at High Pavement more than 70 years ago.

At a time when Nottingham is trying to come to terms with the establishment of a city technology college, it is interesting to realize that the High Pavement curriculum was always vocational as well as academic. The early curriculum included accounting for the boys and needlework for the girls. Science was added shortly after the Great Exhibition of 1851. Indeed, High Pavement must have been one of the first schools in the country to offer science to its pupils.



The labs in 1895 as advertised in the prospectus.

Not only was science taught at High Pavement more than 130 years ago, but science and technology were given greater impetus with the introduction of science scholarships in 1880.

Environmental science, 19th century style – the school garden.

The curriculum was broad and balanced: music and singing were encouraged, and cricket and football were introduced. From 1875 onwards pupils had their horizons further enlarged by annual outings to places outside the city. These must have been more edifying than the day off which they had in August 1864 when one of the last public hangings in Nottingham took place near the school!



High Pavement is now a well-established sixth-form college. During 1988 it will celebrate its bicentenary, and many more stories concerning its 200 years of service to the Nottingham community are likely to come to light. But will anyone challenge its claim to be the oldest county school in Britain?

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