The Deaf School in Bristol

(Notes partly based on research by Dan Hershon)

Although most people believe that the school began with the appointment of the new head teacher, there was a lot of interesting activity prior to this.

Jacob Willcox Rickets was a prominent business man (a partner with the Wills family and owner of the Bristol Brewery). When he died in 1839, he left £500 to Bristol to set up a school.

In 1840, lectures were given in the city by Mr Collier to promote the idea of Deaf education.

As a result a committee was convened, in order to use Mr Ricketts’ money and to raise other funds. By 1841, there was sufficient to set up the school at 25 Orchard Street with four pupils, under the tuition of Matthew Robert Burns.

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The Bristol and District Institution for the Deaf and Dumb  1841 – 1851

The school began in very small premises which can still be seen today (behind the Hippodrome in Bristol centre).

Children were to be admitted from the ages of 7 to 12 years and there were three different rates of fees: £10 per annum for "indigent deaf and dumb", £20 for the middle classes and £50 for children whose parents were "in the higher walks of life." (note: £50 equates to over £4,000 in 2015 money values).

The Duke of Beaufort became the Patron.

Matthew Robert Burns (above) was born deaf in 1798. He attended the Asylum for Deaf in London. He moved back to Edinburgh, set up a Sunday school and then a Day School in competition with the existing Institution. He moved to Dundee and then Aberdeen as Assistant Teacher and finally in 1841 to Bristol to become head teacher. His hearing sister was appointed as Matron.

Despite his skills, the Bristol committee decided his sister was not performing her duties well enough and sacked her. As she was his interpreter, he decided it was not possible to continue without her on the staff. He left in 1843.

The school was not ideal as there was no play area and so it moved to Park Row just after Matthew Burns left. He was replaced by
Robert Webster a teacher from the Dublin school, who was a harsh disciplinarian.

There were 18 pupils in the school by this time.

Mr Webster was soon in trouble with the Committee for not spending enough time with children, leaving them while he went off and was reported as being unkind to students. Matters were brought to a head in 1851 and Mr Webster decided to resign. However, it appears that he had been planning a different enterprise, despite him denying it.

(from Dan Hershon’s account): Webster admits that although:

"...he might have expressed himself to that gentleman in a way, to convey that he entertained some intention of taking a house, and receiving private pupils at Clifton, he deprecated the idea of such his intention having any connection with his letter of resignation, and wished the Committee to regard what passed as a private communication..."

In fact, this was exactly what Mr Webster planned to do and in 1851, he took away with him, a number of the children to his new school for gentlemen, at Malvern House in Redland.

Mr Webster later took medical training and opened his own practice for treating hearing loss.

The report in 1843, says the children were to be instructed in:

"... reading through the medium of Dactylogy, or the Manual Alphabet, Printed Characters, Pictures, and Natural Objects - and in Writing, by the ordinary method - to these are added, Arithmetic, Geography, and Drawing, according as the abilities and application of the pupil prepare him for their acquirement. From the moment of his entering the school, his Moral and Religious training commences. ...... With a view, further to qualify these Deaf and Dumb Children for future usefulness, the girls are instructed in needle-work, knitting, &c., and general household duties - and it is intended to teach the boys such handicraft occupations, mat and basket making, printing, &c., as may enable them to be apprenticed with advantage on leaving the Institution, and ultimately to earn a respectable livelihood."

In 1843, there were 20 pupils: 1 Parlour (Private) Boarder, 11 from the Poorer Class, 4 Day and 4 Sunday Scholars. This was a small number compared to London with 260 pupils, Glasgow 72. It never grew to more than 70 pupils. They did take one pupil aged 25 years, but that was unusual. There were problems of discipline: Hershon notes:

“The ... punishment the Secretary went on to suggest was:

"stocks, not the modern ladies seminary apparatus and backboard, but the old and nearly obsolete village arrangement..."

After consulting with Mr. Webster, it was resolved to purchase a pair of moveable stocks, that could also be screwed into the floor. According to the Minutes for February 1844, the stocks were ... installed, and the first pupil who was put in them was heard to remark:

"that stocks were only for drunkards etc., (and) that he would take care not to be placed in them again."

Deaf schools have probably moved on since then.