

ROLE OF SCHOOL ATTENDANCE/INQUIRY OFFICER

In the 19th century, for the general population, the Church of England sponsored most of the formal education and in 1811 set up the 'National schools' for education of the poor, and promoted religious education. There were also number of voluntary schools, e.g.: Sunday schools run by the non-denominational Sunday School Movement; some set up by charities or workplaces (e.g.: Rowntrees, Lord Onslow for estate workers' children); nonconformist, non-denominational 'British' schools run by the British and Foreign School Society; ragged schools; and village dame schools. The state became involved in 1833, when it started to provide funding for building schools for poor children. The 1834 Poor Law (Amendment) Act made provision for use of relief for the education of children in the workhouse, although there was poor take up of this, as many guardians were hostile.

In none of these was attendance compulsory, and usually fees had to be paid to attend, although Denison's Act of 1855 empowered Guardians to pay the school fees of paupers.

In many families, children were expected to help in the fields (at the very least, seasonally) or work to help support the family. Even the Royal Commission on the State of Popular Education in England (Newcastle) report of 1861, which recognised the class divide in education and the poor standard of much that was delivered, stated: '*if the wages of the child's labour are necessary, either to keep the parents from the poor rates, or to relieve the pressure of severe and bitter poverty, it is far better that it should go to work at the earliest age at which it can bear the physical exertion than that it should remain at school*'.¹

There was a strong link between school absenteeism and poverty, especially if there were a lot of younger children in the households. Also, the weather affected attendance. Thus, there could be large numbers of children not receiving any education.

The Revised Code of 1862 (Lowe's Code)² was one of the first to encourage regular school attendance, by making grant payments to schools dependent on attendance and examination results (payment by results). The payment was 4s/scholar according to the average attendance at morning and afternoon sessions (of minimum 2 hours length); and for every scholar who had attended more than 200 sessions (either morning or afternoon), a payment of 8s (for over 6's) or 6s 6d (for under 6's). These extra payments were subject to examination success. There was a separate payment schedule for evening sessions (over 12's). Also, grants were payable for scholars attending under any Half Time Act after 100 attendances (subject to examination, unless they had already achieved the required standard).

If scholars failed the examination they were entered for, then a deduction from the grant was made (of 2s 8d for each of reading, writing and arithmetic, for those receiving the 8s grant, and less for the younger children). The examinations to be passed were:

	Reading	Writing	Standard
Standard I	Narrative in monosyllables	Form on blackboard or slate, from dictation, letters, capital and small, manuscript.	Form on blackboard or slate, from dictation, figures up to 20; name at sight figures up to 20; add and subtract figures up to 10, orally, from examples on blackboard.

Standard II	One of the Narratives next in order after monosyllables in an elementary reading book used in the school.	Copy in manuscript character a line of print.	A sum in simple addition or subtraction, and the multiplication table.
Standard III	A short paragraph from an elementary reading book used in the school.	A sentence from the same paragraph, slowly read once, and then dictated in single words.	
Standard IV	A short paragraph from a more advanced reading book used in the school.	A sentence slowly dictated once by a few words at a time, from the same book, but not the same paragraph.	A sum in compound rules (money).
Standard V	A few lines of poetry from a reading book used in the first class of the school.	A sentence slowly dictated once by a few words at a time, from a reading book used in the first class of the school.	A sum in compound rules (common weights and measures).
Standard VI	A short ordinary paragraph in a newspaper, or other modern narrative.	Another short ordinary paragraph in a newspaper, or other modern narrative, slowly dictated once by a few words at a time.	A sum in practice or bills of parcels.

The 1870 Elementary Education Act (Forster Act) Provided for universal provision of elementary education for all children, age 5-13 (although children could leave after the age of 10, if they reached standard V), and established (optional) electable School Boards to oversee the provision of this education. The schools were only part funded, so were not free, but exemptions could be made for poor parents, and attendance was still not mandatory. However, there was provision made which allowed School Boards to pass local bye-laws to enforce attendance. If there was no School Board then there could be no compulsory attendance.

In 1875, optional subjects such as grammar, history, geography, a foreign language were introduced in addition to the existing 3Rs (+needlework for girls).

The Elementary Education Act of 1876 (Sandons Act) not only introduced a system of certificates, and made school free for the last 3 years to any that had achieved Standard IV at age 10 (and had a specified record of attendance), but it made it a legal duty of parents to ensure their children were educated. Although it still did not make attendance compulsory it fined parents if their children did not hold a certificate of proficiency in the 3Rs at some point between the ages of 10 and 13. If there was no School Board, a School Attendance Committee was formed. They had the power to appoint School Attendance Officers.

Also, throughout the 1860s and 1870s, there were a series of Acts restricting the hours children worked, and ensuring those who did could demonstrate a specified level of school attendance, and /or standard of education achieved. In 1878 children under 10 were barred from employment, and those under 13 had to attend school at least half the time (one session per day, or all day on alternate days). These were known as half-timers.

In 1880, a Liberal government passed the 1880 Elementary Education Act (the 'Mundella Act') to make school attendance compulsory until at least the age of 10, after which they could leave when they obtained a specified Standard, and it made employers liable if any child of age 10 to 13 in their employ did not have a suitable certificate of education.

From 1891, elementary schools effectively became free (with the state paying fees of up to 10s per child per year). In 1893, the school leaving age was raised to 11.³

The attendance officer, although employed by the school attendance committee, could not be appointed without the approval of either the council or the guardians by whom the committee was appointed. If by the guardians, then approval from the Local Government Board was also needed. Payment for the officer was either from the borough rates (if appointed by the council), or from the poor rate if by the guardians. The poor rate also funded the cost of attendance registers and Certificates. For a guardian appointed committee, the clerk to the committee was the clerk of the board of guardians.⁴⁵

The duties of the Guildford Union School Attendance Committee in 1880 were outlined as follows:

- To ensure that children do no work until they are of a certain age.
- To ensure that parents do not habitually, or without reasonable excuse, neglect to put their children through elementary education.
- To enforce any by-laws made in accordance with the relevant Acts (it has no remit concerning the rate of school fees or the subjects taught).
- Can appoint Local Committees to aid them in execution of the Acts (to comprise of a Guardian, the clergyman, the school manager(s) in each parish, and other suitable persons), for consultation with and assistance of the School Attendance Officers, to help increase effectiveness of the latter, and reduce the number of cases taken to court (so reduce costs).
- Authority to appoint paid School Attendance Officers

The Committee costs from Lady-day 1877 to Lady-day 1878 were £383. At that time the law specified that no child under 14 could be employed (even at home) unless they had attained a 3rd standard certificate, or attended 250 times in each year, for 4 years (with warning that from 1881 children would need a 4th standard certificate and have had the requisite attendance for 5 years).⁶

The school attendance officer's role involved visiting schools to obtain the names of children who had not attended (schools were required to regularly complete attendance reports provided by the attendance officer), and then visiting the parents' home to determine the circumstances, and 'encourage' attendance. They could also question truants, obtain their home and school details, and return them to school. In rare cases they could remove children from parental care, or take the parents to court. The 1876 Act also gave them authority to enter workplaces and check that regulations regarding children were adhered to.

In addition, they had to conduct an annual census of school attendances, to inform the education boards whether there were sufficient school places in each area, and by comparing names on the census with those on school registers, give warning if places on the school roll were being occupied by too many non-attendees.

There was also a school inquiry officer role (although the two positions were often combined, with an uplift of salary). The role was helpfully summarised in an advertisement for such an officer as:⁷

- Attend Guardians meetings when required
- Receive all applications for payment of School Fees from parents not being paupers residing in the Union, and then to examine the circumstances of the case by visiting the house of the applicant and making enquiry into the means of the applicant.

- In cases where applications are made direct to the Guardians, to make similar examination and inquiry.
- To enter particulars into a “School Fees Application and Report” book, and present to the Guardians.
- To make further enquiries as the Guardians may request.
- To pay the School Fees to the School Board or School Manager, as directed by the Guardians, and keep account of this in the “School Fees Receipt and Payment Account” book.

As the inquiry officer also had involvement with parents who were not paupers there was some discussion within the unions around the country as to whether this role should be assigned to relieving officers. Some thought that the relieving officers were ideally situated as they were already checking those receiving poor relief about their children’s education, and it would permit parents, who were not paupers but just poor, to show they were unable to pay without having to join those coming to the Guardians for relief, while others worried about ‘appearances’, and that a relieving officer visiting a home would be remarked upon in the community. and that the school attendance officer should have the role.⁸

The diligence of authorities in checking attendance varied with area, and many more visits were made to homes, than ended up in court (e.g.: in 1887, the attendance officer in Oxford (one of the more meticulous School Boards) made 6000 visits to children’s homes and schools and issued 1000 warning notices, but this resulted in only 128 court summons. Taking people to court was expensive, the fines issued low, and often ignored (and many families did not have possessions of sufficient value to seize to meet the fines).⁹

A School Attendance Officers' National Association was formed in 1884.

Author: Lesley Hall, June 2025

¹ Royal Commission on the State of Popular Education in England (Newcastle), 1861, pg. 188; <https://education-uk.org/documents/newcastle1861/newcastle1.html>

² Revised Code 1862, Education in the UK, <https://www.education-uk.org/documents/cce/revised-code.html>

³ History of Education in England, Wikipedia,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_education_in_England#Medieval_period

School attendance in Victorian times, half timers. Compulsory attendance, truancy, attendance officers, 1800s-1900s,

Hub Pages, <https://discover.hubpages.com/education/Attendance-at-the-Victorian-School-half-timers-compulsory-attendance-truancy-and-attendance-officers>

Education in the UK: Legislation, <https://www.education-uk.org/documents/acts/index.html>

Derek Gillard, Education in England, a History, <https://www.education-uk.org/history/chapter06.html>

⁴ *West Surrey Times*, 8 December 1877

⁵ Elementary Education Act, 1876; Education in the UK: Legislation,

<https://education-uk.org/documents/acts/1876-elem-educ-act.html>

⁶ School Attendance Regulations, *West Surrey Advertiser*, 5 June 1880

⁷ Durham Union, Inquiry Officer Wanted, *Durham County Advertiser*, 25 May 1877 (via BNA)

⁸ Dudley Board of Guardians, Appointment of Inquiry Officer for Tipton, *County Advertiser & Herald*, 26 May 1877 (via BNA)

⁹ Nichola Sheldon, Tackling truancy: why have the millions invested not paid off?, 2009, History and Policy, <https://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/tackling-truancy-why-have-the-millions-invested-not-paid-off#:~:text=Shortly%20after%20the%20introduction%20of%20the%20universal%20provision,absentees%2C%20visit%20homes%20and%20pursue%20prosecutions%20of%20parents>