

Webster's Endowed Schools

1674-1906

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The Webster family were clothmakers, indeed the name derives from “webba”, a weaver [1]. They owned land and property in Whittington, and three of them, Peter, his son Joshua, and Joshua’s son, Peter junior, demonstrated a keen interest in the education of local children by leaving legacies in their Wills for this purpose. Peter senior was born in Whittington, to Nicholas and Anne Webster. He was baptised at the old church in 1593, and in his teens he went to London where he became a cloth dealer, eventually supplying royalty. He became a Master in his trade, and accrued a substantial fortune [4]. Although no longer resident in the area the family visited and took an interest in the development of Whittington, a large but sparsely populated parish which comprised at that time of what is now known as Old Whittington, New Whittington, Whittington Moor and Sheepbridge.

The first school to be built, known as the Whittington Free Grammar School, was thought to be within the old church’s boundary wall at the south west end. Peter donated £20 towards the building of the school, which was founded about 1674 [3]. Peter died on the 29th December 1678. In his Will, dated 1674 he made provision for “Two hundred pounds on a purchase of Lands(to)provide and keep an Homestead and able Schoolmaster in the Parish of Whittington that shall teach and instruct twenty of the meanest and poorest that shall be or born in the said Parish”. The schoolmaster was to be paid an annual salary of £10. The fund was to be administered by five Trustees. His son, Joshua Webster, in his Will of 1696, bequeathed a large sum of money to be added to his father’s Trust, and Plumtree Farm “for the educating of ten poor children of the parish of Whittington” [2,4]. Peter junior also left money and land when he died in 1764 [4].

The money was invested and the fund increased in value [4], but a report in the Derbyshire Courier of 25/9/1847 suggests that there had been a hiatus in the management of the Trust. In 1848 it was reported that the last payment made to a school master was in 1841 and the school house was shut up and falling into disrepair. At a meeting on 6/4/1848 new Trustees were appointed, one of whom was Frederick Swanwick, a civil engineer. Like the Websters, Frederick had a keen interest in education, and the wherewithal to donate a site and some funding for a new school [2] (See Old Whittington School)

In 1866 the Charity sought to raise funds by selling land and property, with the approval of the Charity Commissioners. The Derbyshire Courier 11/4/1866 carries an announcement of the lots which were available for sale by auction at the Revolution House. The same newspaper reports on 7/9/1867 that the ratepayers of Whittington had attended a meeting to discuss how monies raised by parochial charities, which included the schools endowment, should be best spent. The Midland Railway Company had purchased much of the land sold in 1866, and The Derbyshire Courier of 18/5/1868 reported that the Company had purchased yet more land from the Charity.

In 1869 the National Education League started a campaign for free, compulsory and non-religious education for all children. The Elementary Education Act in 1870 introduced local Education Authorities to ensure that schooling was available for all children from the age of 5 until they were 10, but it wasn't until 1880 that attendance was made compulsory, and fees were payable until 1891. In areas where there was a shortfall of school places for the children in the catchment areas, School Boards were set up, with the authority to approve grants to existing schools, and also to build their own schools (Board Schools) [5]. Grants were made available for the Whittington school and no Board schools were built in the area.

Increasing pupil numbers necessitated extra schooling provision and the Charity took the decision to build schools at New Whittington and Whittington Moor. The contractor was Mr Fiddler, a builder from Eckington, and according to the "Building News" of 30/6/1876 both schools were opened at the end of June, 1876

(See New Whittington School)

(See Whittington Moor School)

Almost twenty years later the Trustees were faced with the same predicament, not enough space for the growing number of children, together with a large deficit in their accounts. The Derbyshire Courier of 1/4/1893 reported that the Charity owed £837 17s 7d to the bank.

School accommodation was needed for children at the Brushes, Sheepbridge, but the governors considered that extensions to existing schools at New and Old Whittington would provide places for those children without needing to build another school.

However, an infants school was opened in November 1894 at Sheepbridge, the Trustees having hired accommodation there.

(See The Brushes School)

At a Governors' meeting early the following year, reported in the Derbyshire Courier of 21/4/1894, one of the issues discussed was that of payment for fees and books. The Elementary Education Act of 1891 had introduced free elementary education for all children and consequently parents were refusing to pay.

Despite financial constraints the Whittington Endowed Schools were performing extremely well. The Derbyshire Times of 12/1/1895 reports that the excellent merit grant had been awarded to Old Whittington Mixed Department, New Whittington Infant Department, and Whittington Moor Mixed Department. Bulmers Directory (1895) reports that "The school charity and estate are under the management of five governors, in whom also the various local charities have been vested by the Charity Commissioners.

A new school was built in 1850, and subsequently enlarged to accommodate 450 children. There are two departments, mixed and infants, and an average attendance of 450. Schools have also been erected at New Whittington and Whittington Moor, each having two departments, mixed and infants. Evening continuation schools are held in the winter months, and are amongst the best attended in the county." The 1902 Education Act abolished School Boards and established Local Education Authorities. Board Schools were re-named as Council Schools. The LEAs were now responsible for monitoring the performance of Voluntary schools such as the Websters' Endowed schools [6]. The Websters' schools were not alone in experiencing financial difficulties. Voluntary schools were funded by government grants which were awarded depending on them meeting certain criteria e.g. providing enough places for the pupils, buildings

with adequate ventilation etc. Grants were withheld or reduced if they couldn't meet these criteria.

There is a long report in the Derbyshire Times of 6/5/1905 detailing a discussion about the future of Webster's Endowed Schools, the endowment being insufficient to provide the additional school accommodation demanded by the Board of Education. It was recorded that the population had increased from about 4,000 to 10,000. All four of Peter Webster's Endowed schools were transferred to the Local Education Authority in 1906, becoming Council Schools, with the Trust continuing to provide additional help for pupils in the parish.

Peter Webster's legacy continues as Webster's Whittington School Charity and Estates:-

From an advertisement in the Derbyshire Times 5/8/2016:

"Pupils under 19 years in the area can still get a grant. We give an initial grant to students attending college or university full time to help with their expenses. The Trustees may from time to time make one-off grants to schools within the parish of Whittington, or those outside the parish which are attended by students resident in the parish of Whittington."

The Webster Whittington School Charity provides small grants to young people from the parish of Whittington, who are leaving school to go to university, college, or sixth form. To be eligible, you should be under the age of 19, live in old or New Whittington, Sheepbridge, the Brushes or the east side of Whittington Moor (the same side as Peter Webster Centre).

You should be taking a full-time course of education that lasts for at least one year. Application forms and additional information are available by contacting webstercharity@gmail.com."

Newspapers are available at the British Newspaper Archives or Find My Past websites (both subscription sites)

[1] <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/webster>

[2] Ellis Crompton's History of Whittington Parish

https://stbartholomew.co.uk/?page_id=1284

[3] Webster Family

https://stbartholomew.co.uk/?page_id=1783

[4] "A History of Old Whittington" by Tom Bates

[5] <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/school/overview/1870educationact/>

[6] <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/school/overview/reform1902-14/>