

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 Ricketts 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.



DEAF AND DUMB.
THE Executors of the Will of JACOB WILCOX RICKETTS, late of Vincent Lodge, in the Parish of Westbury-upon-Trym, in the City and County of Bristol, Esquire, who died on the 29th day of August, 1839, HEREBY GIVE NOTICE, That by the said Will proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, 22nd October, 1839; the sum of £500 is bequeathed to Trustees upon trust, to place the same at Interest, upon the Government Funds, and during the space of 10 years from the Testator's decease, or until a Society shall be formed in Bristol for EDUCATING the DEAF and DUMB, which shall first happen, to invest the Dividends in additional Stock; and in the event of a Society being formed in Bristol for educating the Deaf and Dumb, within 10 years from the Testator's decease, upon trust, to pay such sum of £500 and accumulations, or transfer such Stock unto the Treasurer for the time being of such Society, for the purposes of the said Society. But in case, at the end of 10 years from the Testator's decease, no such Society shall have been formed in Bristol, then the Testator directs that such sum of £500 and accumulations shall sink into and form part of his residuary personal Estate.
A. & J. LIVETT, Solicitors to the Executors.
Bristol, 22nd April, 1840.

Although there were other schools in England and Scotland and Ireland, reached Bristol was very slow to follow.

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.

BRISTOL INSTITUTION, PARK-STREET.—We understand that, at the request of many ladies and gentlemen, who were unable to attend the morning lectures of Mr. Collier, on the education of the blind, the deaf and dumb, and of blind mutes, he will repeat them on the evenings of Wednesday and Friday next, at half-past seven o'clock. Free tickets of admission may be obtained at the institution. Mr. Collier is very desirous that the deaf mutes in the city and neighbourhood, whether children or adults, should be brought to the institution on Wednesday evening, in order that immediate arrangements be made for assembling them on Sundays, for the purpose of giving them religious instruction.

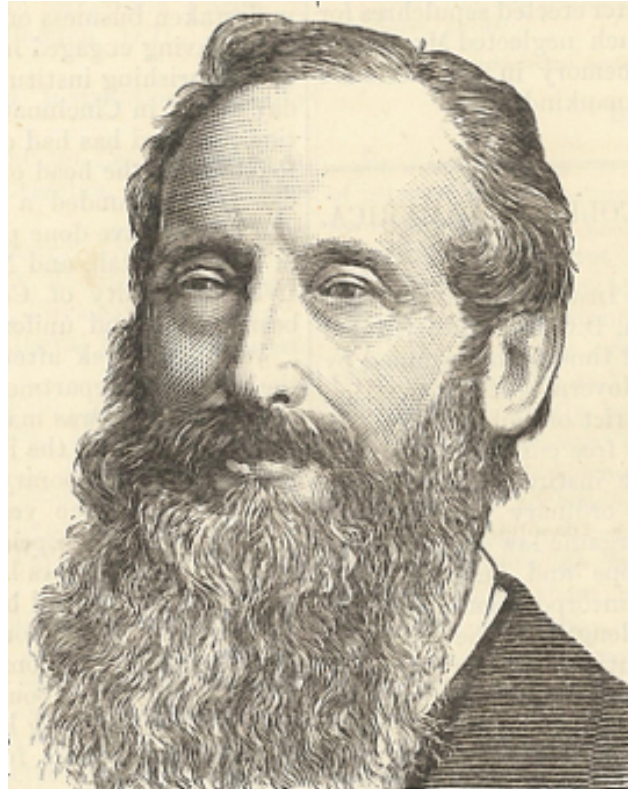
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The Bristol and District Institution for the Deaf and Dumb 1841 – 1851

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

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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.