

13 October 1883

ST NICHOLAS SCHOOLS AND BOAT CHILDREN Last evening, a meeting of the managers of the St Nicholas School received a deputation from the School Board at the schoolroom, to consider the question of admitting the children of boatmen into the schools. The managers present were the Rev J J Luce, Messrs W Byett, W Green, J Powell, F Dupre, H J Sherwood, T W Webb, J Thomas and F Stanway, and the deputation were the Rev J Mayne and Mr J P Wilson.

The Rev J Luce said the managers were glad to see the deputation. They expected their visit from the remarks at the School Board meeting that had appeared in the newspapers with respect to the managers.

The Rev J Mayne thanked the managers for the readiness with which they had granted the request of the School Board for an interview. The matter which they were there to consider arose out of a representation which was made at a meeting of the Irregular Attendance Committee. It was stated to the committee that a child of a boatman had been sent to the St Nicholas School, and that a fee of sixpence per week had been demanded – a fee which was altogether out of the power of the parent of the child to pay. The child had consequently not gone to school. The case stood thus :- That as the child was not going to school, it was the duty of the School Board to ascertain the cause. The cause was stated to be, in this particular case, that a prohibition school fee was placed upon the child, and the parent was unable to pay it. The hands of the Board were thus tied, and they were almost helpless to carry out their work. The Board had been led to believe that this particular case was not the only one of its kind, but that there were many parents in the St Nicholas district were in the same position. The Board were therefore desirous of a friendly interview, to see if a better and more satisfactory state of things could not be brought about.

Mr J P Wilton said he was present on the committee when this particular case came before them. The parent, who was of the boating class, asked what she was to do under the circumstances. She stated that when she was in Birmingham with the boat, the child went to school free, but had to pay 6d a week at the St Nicholas School. Why, she asked, were they of the boating class to be treated differently to other people who only pay 3d? He knew perfectly well what was the reason of this extra charge. The managers' difficulty was that of the question of average and daily attendance. The daily average of the school would be considerably diminished by the irregular attendance of the boat children. There were one or two considerations why these children should be treated as other children. The St Nicholas School was the school of the parish in which they resided, and he did not think one parishioner ought to be treated on one scale, and another on a different scale. It was the duty of the School Board to see that children go to school, and if they were refused at one school on account of prohibitory fees, it was clear another school must be provided, and the city would be put to the expense of erecting a fresh school.

The Rev J Luce said that before replying to the representations the deputation had made, he wished to refer to the remarks made at the School Board meeting. The managers felt that an injustice had been done them which should be repaired. The Chairman of the School Board was reported in the *Citizen* to have said, "St Nicholas Schools were built some time ago partly by public subscription, not for children in other parts of Gloucester, but for those in the parish of St Nicholas, a great number of whom are, in fact, boat children ; so that if the managers close their doors against this class of children, they would not really be fulfilling the work for which the schools were built". To that statement, the managers took exception, as they claimed to be carrying out to the best of their ability the purposes for which the schools were built. To say that the schools were built exclusively for the benefit of the children of that parish was not strictly accurate. With regard to the charges of acting capriciously and unfairly towards the boat children, they denied them. They had adopted a certain course with respect to these children, which was arrived at after twelve months careful consideration, and the exceptional fee of 6d was charged. They had treated the boat children exceptionally because theirs was an exceptional case. They invited the attention of the School Board in the following facts :- (1) Boatmen were not ranked among the poorest parishioners, but were rather looked upon as people earning good wages ; (2) some of their children attending school themselves earn money when they were away ; (3) they were grossly irregular in their attendance ;

(4) that gross irregularity tended to demoralise the tone of the whole of the whole school, which was the most serious consideration ; (5) those children incur their share of the general expenses of the school and yet paid a very insignificant contribution, even when compared with other children ; (6) under the new Code, the boat children would have to be presented on precisely the same conditions as other children, and that would mean a serious pecuniary loss. In the particular case to which reference had been made, he should state that the mother of the child promised to keep her child at school and was only charged 3d. She broke her promise, and the fee was raised to 6d, the managers having no other choice. If the case – or any other – could be proved to be one of real hardship, the managers would be always ready to make allowances. Was it unfair, he asked, that the managers should protect themselves as they did, when they were struggling for very existence, and was it their duty to endanger the interests of the whole of the school for the sake of these exceptional cases? That was practically what they were asked to do. If the Board would suggest a plan by which the managers might treat the boat children upon the same terms as other children, and at the same time be fair to the school generally, they would be happy to consider it.

A long discussion ensued in which the deputation and most of the managers took part.

The Rev J Mayne said the statement of Mr Luce had put a different complexion on the matter. He was extremely sorry any remarks he had made should have caused trouble to the managers – such was far from his intention. The managers had made it plain to him that the boatmen were not the poorest class, and could afford to pay this higher fee. He could not now regard the boat children so hardly treated as he did before he came to the meeting. The case in question was somewhat peculiar, and the Board had been deceived by the parent. The irregularity of these children would materially affect the daily average, and deprive the school of its merited grant of excellence. The School Board were, however, not relieved of their difficulty, and if St Nicholas School could not take the children in, the Board must purchase or build some school for them.

Mr Webb asked why the Board could not send the children to the Board Schools, and it was stated that the parents had a great objection to send their children so far.

Mr Witton said there was one way out of the difficulty which had suggested itself to his mind, and that was to petition the Education Department to allow boat children to be admitted to school and not counted in the daily average. If such a petition were granted, would the St Nicholas managers receive the boat children at 3d per week.

Mr Stanway was of opinion they could not, as a separate teaching staff would be required.

The Rev J Luce, however, asked for time to consider the question.

The meeting then terminated.