

congregations. State inspectors of schools were appointed in 1839 but it was not until the 1870 Act that Government took a firm hand on elementary education by introducing elected school boards with the power to build and manage schools, to compel attendance and to levy a rate. 'Elementary' education was not a stage in the education process; it meant a minimal education for those who could not pay for anything better.

The 1870 Act saw the demise of many pioneering church schools without the financial resources to maintain the standard of the new *board schools*. However, religious education remained a compulsory subject in all elementary schools, subject to a conscience clause.

Thorpe's red-brick school had been built a few years earlier than the 1870 Act, in 1864. The land was glebe land and therefore, on 18 July 1864, it was conveyed by the then incumbent, the Reverend Robert Pargeter Humfrey with the consent of the Lord Bishop of Peterborough and the Overseers of the Poor of the parish. (The Overseers legally originate from a 1597 Act whereby they were initially appointed and empowered to assess every parish, collecting local rates for the relief of the aged, impotent and sick. Overseers were abolished in 1927.)

Thorpe's school building was enlarged in 1898. Even then it only had two classrooms, separated by folding screen doors, for infants and juniors; the latter being known as the 'mixed' class.

The first meeting of Thorpe's 'School Board' was held in 1871, comprising the rector, two churchwardens and three other parishioners. The meeting decided that 'all children up to their twelfth birthday be compelled to attend school'. This was higher than the national requirement as it was not until 1880 that all children were compelled to attend school between the ages of five and ten. This was raised to eleven in 1893 and to twelve in 1899 (except for those employed in agriculture).

Thorpe's School Board set a local parish rate to provide funds for school expenses. In 1885, this was two (old) pence in the pound. The amount remained unchanged for at least six years. Nationally, fees for poor children were paid by the boards from 1876 until 1891 when all fees were abolished. The minutes of Thorpe's School Board in August 1891 refer to the acceptance of the free grant offered by the Education Department and that from 1 September the school would become a free one, in accordance with the Elementary Education Act 1891.

There was close association between Victorian education and social class. Therefore, the few middle class parents in Thorpe probably followed the nation-wide preference for private schooling, not allowing their offspring to share benches with the children of the lower working class. Residential private schools were 'the bedrock of the Victorian middle classes'.