

USEFUL LOCAL HISTORY SOURCES 3: SCHOOL LOG BOOKS

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Introduction

After the Reformation, elementary school education in Scotland was controlled by the Established Church of Scotland in accordance with the 1st and 2nd Books of Discipline (1560 and 1578). These stated that 'every several church have a schoolmaster appointed'. This has commonly been interpreted as meaning provision of 'a school in every parish', an aim which, aided by the 1696 Education Act, was gradually achieved over the ensuing centuries. However, by the mid-nineteenth century this parish-based education system had

become fragmented by religious divisions and had failed to respond to industrialisation, agricultural improvements, Irish immigration and competition from a growing number of private adventure, dame, industrial and ragged schools.

In response to the rising secular concern, the Royal (Argyll) Commission of Inquiry into Scottish Education was set up in 1864. This led to the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872 which introduced compulsory education for all 5-13 year olds and established a network of School Boards, one in each parish and burgh, to take over the management of existing



Fig. 1: St Kilda School head-teacher George Murray with his pupils (1886).

schools. However, education was not to be free and the 1872 Act included powers for School Boards to set fees, meet any deficiency in State funding by a local 'school rate', and borrow finance to build new school accommodation. The Act also created the Scotch Education Department (SED) with overall oversight and powers to issue detailed Codes (Regulations) to regulate the activities of the School Boards.¹

In 1867 the Argyll Commission recorded 4443 schools of all types in Scotland, although the actual total was probably around 5000. Following the introduction of the 1872 Act, the total number of State-funded schools within Scotland's then 926 parishes and 58 burghs was 2388 – of which 1352 were 'public elementary' schools managed by School Boards. The remainder were still in the hands of the churches: 607 Church of Scotland; 275 Free Church of Scotland; 75 Episcopalian; 79 Roman Catholic. There is some uncertainty over the number of pupils that actually attended school before and after the introduction of the 1872 Act. The Argyll Commission estimated that there were 490,000 children of school age in Scotland, 90,000 of whom were not getting any education and 200,000 of whom were receiving education in uninspected schools of dubious merit. In 1873 there were 515,353 pupils on public school rolls.

By 1879-80, the number of schools of all types in Scotland was recorded as 3893. School building programmes instigated by School Boards had almost doubled the number of public elementary schools to 2503 and there were also 605 'aided non-public', 508 'other elementary' and 277 'higher class' schools. Pupil numbers had risen to 534,428, with 404,618 actually in attendance – figures surprisingly consistent with 1881 census data which record 544,982 pupils with an average attendance of 409,966.

The Introduction of School Log Books

The above data reveal that the compulsory clauses of the 1872 Act were initially slow to be recognised. In response, the 1st Code, issued by the SED in May 1873, stated that the level of State funding for each school would be calculated by Inspectors (HMI) according to a formula based on average attendance, academic results, discipline and organisation.² To aid them during their annual visits, HMI were authorised to examine two mandatory documents – the twice-daily attendance register and the school log book in which head teachers were to record at least weekly 'an entry which will specify ordinary progress, and other facts concerning the school or its teachers ... which may require to be referred to at future time, or otherwise deserve to be recorded'.

Some school log books pre-date the 1872 Act, having been a requirement of some burghs and kirk sessions from the 1850s. Post-1872, the general interpretation of the SED Code was that log books should contain information on circumstances affecting attendance, eg: illness (particularly closures during infectious disease epidemics); exceptional weather; special local events; absences of teaching staff; alterations to buildings. In practice, some head teachers also noted other information about school life, for example: subjects being taught; prize-giving ceremonies; holidays; punishments; visits of HMI; extracts from inspection reports; unusual incidents.³

Although log books rarely name individual pupils, they do name teachers (including pupil teachers) and visitors, eg: School Board members; local clergy or gentry. In consequence, log books are subject to the Data Protection Act (1998) and,

unless permission is granted, a 30 or 50-year closure rule applies. This increases to 75 or 100 years if they contain sensitive data about an adult or a child.

Sources of School Log Books

Legally, school log books are the property of the school and many still exercise their right to retain them, especially their more recent data-protected volumes. Examples include Hutchison's Grammar School, Morrison's Academy, Fortrose Academy and Inverness High School whilst Perth Academy's log books were transferred to Perth & Kinross Archives in 2010. Over the years, school closures and local administration changes have resulted in many volumes of early log books becoming lost, destroyed or irreparably damaged. Nevertheless a large number have been deposited in local authority archives or libraries and museums where they can be professionally stored and conserved.

The best starting place for a search to locate the log books, or the School Board minutes, of a local authority (or Catholic) school is the website of the Scottish Archive Network (www.scan.org.uk). Another useful source is the National Register of Archives for Scotland (www.nas.gov.uk/nras) which contains listings of log books still in private collections, including those of many Episcopalian schools. The listings on these sites are by no means complete, so if an initial search is unsuccessful it is necessary to search the holdings of individual local authority or regional archives or libraries.

Unfortunately, not every local authority archive (or library) has an on-line catalogue. Those with on-line listings include Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire (includes the former Grampian shires of Banff, Moray and Kincardine), East Lothian, Falkirk, Fife, Perth & Kinross, Scottish Borders (includes the former shires of Berwick, Peebles, Roxburgh and Selkirk) and Shetland. Most others do not have on-line listings, including the city archives of Edinburgh, Dundee and Glasgow; so locating a specific school's log books may require direct enquiries or visits.

It is also worth noting that not all of the on-line catalogues are up to date; for example Edinburgh City Library still lists log books for forty schools although these have been transferred to Edinburgh City Archives. Also, it may not always be obvious which local archive to contact: for example Stirling Archives still hold some Perthshire school log books; the Mitchell Library in Glasgow holds the log books of the former Strathclyde shires of Bute, Dunbarton, Lanark (North & South) and Renfrew – but not Ayrshire or Inverclyde; Highland Archives in Inverness allocates relevant log books to their centres in Caithness, Skye & Lochalsh and Lochaber (the latter also holds the log books of many Argyll schools) and the log books of five schools are held in Gairloch Museum; similarly, the Western Isles (Hebridean) Archives in Stornoway disperses log books to the libraries in Harris, Benbecula and Barra.

Three volumes of school log books have been scanned and can be accessed on-line, as follows:

St Kilda, 1900-30

(www.cne-siar.gov.uk/archives/logbooks/stkildalog)

Mingulay, 1875-1910

(www.cne-siar.gov.uk/archives/logbooks/mingulay)

Pitsligo, Aberdeenshire, 1874-1912

(www.scan.org.uk/researchtools/schoollogbook)

Many printed booklets and other publications that are held

in local libraries or archives provide extracts from local school log books; some relate to single schools whilst others cover several schools in a specific district or shire.⁴

Examples of School Log Book Content

The attendance is still seriously irregular. With 247 names on the Register, the year's average does not rise above 158. (HMI report on Irvine public school, July 1875).

Most early log books are dominated by entries describing the problems associated with poor attendance, lack of suitable accommodation and the collection of fees. The SED originally set fees at a maximum of 9d per week per pupil, however this rate was rarely applied; for example in Ayrshire the standard fee was 3d per week but for 'very poor' parents it was reduced to 1d per week, whilst in many Highland parishes the School Boards charged no fees. Such were the difficulties of collection that the SED abolished all fees in 1889.

Low attendance, especially amongst older pupils, was mainly caused by the need for children to contribute to the family income by working in factories, fields or fishing. In the cities, children over 10 years old could work as '½-timers' in factories and attend school for the remainder of the day. Head teachers commonly lamented their lack of educational progress in the school log book. In coastal areas, children were habitually absent during the fishing (mainly herring) season, travelling with their mothers to the gutting stations. In farming areas, children were regularly required to work from spring to autumn and were commonly absent from school during the 'feeing' or 'hiring markets', the dates and locations of these often being noted in the log books of rural schools. The St Kilda school log book contains many unusual references to absences for food gathering:

Today I arrived in St Kilda but found that I could not open the school till about a fortnight owing to the children helping their parents in bird hunting. These birds which the natives call 'fulmers' form part of their winter supply. (St Kilda school log book, August 1905).

Parents could be prosecuted by the School Board for failing to send their children to school and are sometimes named in log books. Many were fined – but this was futile because the law required a minimum of three months to elapse between convictions and a pupil could easily earn the maximum 20 shillings fine in that period! On occasions, parents refused to send their children to school because of poor facilities or teaching, as for example at the remote Achlyness (side) school:

An impasse has arisen here by the parents withholding their children from the school, an action entirely illegal on their part. (Achlyness school log book, June 1922).

No reason is given in the log book but a new teacher was in post very soon after!

Illness was also a common cause of low attendance and is assiduously recorded in almost all log books. Until 1904, School Boards could close their schools during local outbreaks of life-threatening diseases, especially scarlet fever, diphtheria and measles. After 1904, schools had to obtain a certificate of closure from the County Medical Officer of Health (MOH). Authorised closures were always recorded in the log book because HMI could account for these in calculating the average attendance component of the school's State funding. For the same reason, most head teachers also recorded other illnesses, such as



Fig.2: The classroom at St Kilda School, 2010. Courtesy of Linda Clark.

influenza, ringworm, chicken pox - even colds and sore throats. Log books commonly mention pupil deaths that occurred during local epidemics, although rarely their names. Nonetheless one particularly poignant entry identifies the child:

Owing to the death of my little girl (one of the scholars) school was dismissed till the day after the funeral. (Skene Square school log book, May 1866).

The recording of illness in school log books is so diligent that they can reliably be used for detailed studies of local illness patterns. In a study² of Black Isle schools over the period 1875-1919, it was shown that more than three-quarters of the illness-related pupil absence was due to measles, whooping cough, influenza, scarlet fever and mumps. The findings correlated well with MOH statistical reports and with national data for the Russian (1889-90) and Spanish (1918-19) flu pandemics.

Other than 'normal' school holidays, which varied across the country, many other factors affected pupil attendance and are recorded in most log books. Many schools gave the children an extra holiday if they had given 'a good appearance' at the annual HMI inspection. Other local factors included: local weather – particularly snow in rural areas where children walked several miles to school; local religious ceremonies such as harvest thanksgivings, fast days, communion services, ordinations of church ministers, weddings and funerals; parish fairs and markets, many with long-lost names, such as Janet's Fair in Dingwall and the Timmer Market in Aberdeen at which pupils were required to tend animals and sell produce at stalls. Such entries can be particularly enlightening for local history studies – some being unique to individual schools



Fig.3: Achlyness (side) School, near Kinlochberrie, which closed in 1950, photographed in 2015. Author.

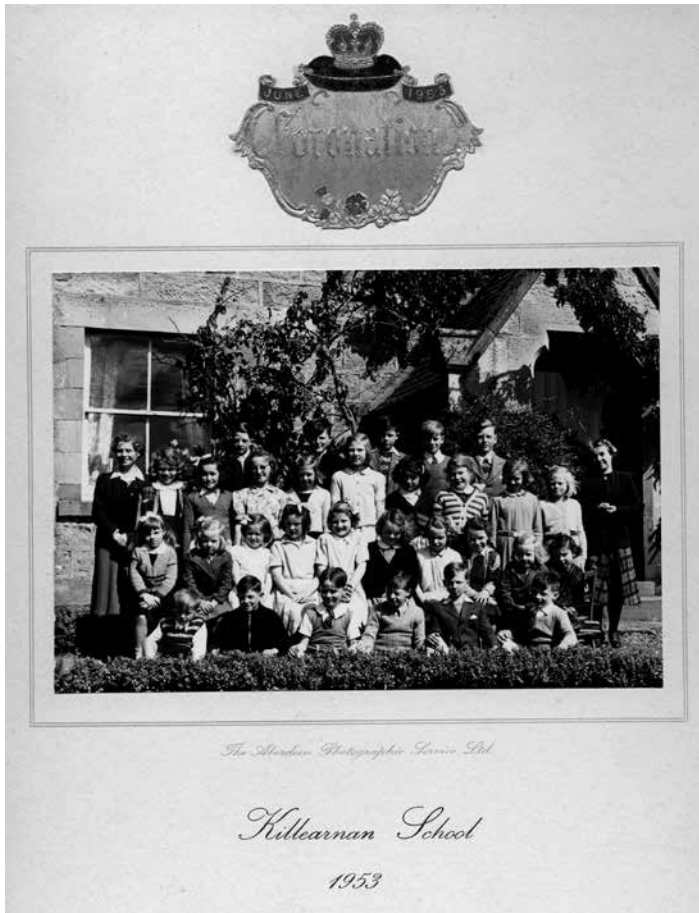


Fig.4: Killearnan School's 1953 Coronation photograph. Courtesy of Sheila MacLennan.

and others perhaps to the specific interests of the head teacher or the Chairman of the School Board:

School will be closed again tomorrow as it is the day on which the annual 'Walk' of the Forbes Lodge of Free Masons is to be held. (Pitsligo school log book, January 1911).

National events also feature strongly, often because they were associated with a half-day or full-day holiday. Many of these were royal celebrations, such as coronations, jubilees and marriages but also local royal visits. Others celebrated Boer War, World War I and World War II battle victories, particularly when local regiments had been involved, and the armistices and proclamations of peace in 1900, 1919 and 1945. Many schools also record their contributions to war efforts - one Aberdeen school knitted 183 pairs of socks and collected £2681 17s 6d for National War Bonds and War Savings Certificates during World War I.

Whilst there is a predominance of entries that explain pupil absence, many head teachers used their log books to notify HMI of pupil progress 'through the standards' and inform them of new initiatives, such as the purchase of new books and maps or the introduction of milk, cocoa or school meals. They also took the opportunity to flag up the need for better facilities. In consequence, there are numerous references to unsuitable desks, inadequate water supplies, dysfunctional 'offices' (lavatories), lack of coal for heating, insufficient books and pupils having to return to slates as they were without pens, etc. HMI reports often relate to the requirement for School Boards to remedy such deficiencies. Log books also regularly refer to inadequate accommodation with classrooms of 70-100 pupils being taught by a single teacher. Such class sizes were not unusual, as for

example in 1877 when a survey of Stirlingshire schools showed there to be a total of 19,969 pupil places and 275 teachers – a county-wide average class size of over 72.

Finally

The directive that required head teachers to keep a weekly log book is no longer in force, having been withdrawn in the 1980s. However, some schools continued to make entries into the 1990s and these will be available to view after the closure period has expired. As no Scotland-wide survey has been carried out, it is not known how many school log books have actually survived – but a reasonable estimate⁵ suggests it is in excess of 12,000 volumes. As most contain several hundred pages, they collectively provide an enormous but under-used resource for Scottish nineteenth-twentieth century local historical and community studies.⁶ Much of the vast amount of information they contain is not readily available elsewhere and, furthermore, they can also enrich family history research in exposing aspects of the lives of those people mentioned in them.⁷

Notes and References

- 1 There are numerous texts that describe the development of school education in Scotland. Some examples are: RD Anderson, *Education and the Scottish People 1750-1918* (Clarendon Press, 1995); A Bain, *Education in Stirlingshire* (Scottish Council for Research in Education, 1965); H Holmes (ed), *Scottish Life & Society: A Compendium of Scottish Ethnology, Vol.11, Institutions of Scotland: Education* (Tuckwell Press, 2000); HM Knox, *Two Hundred and Fifty Years of Scottish Education 1696-1946* (Oliver & Boyd, 1953); J McDermid, *The Schooling of Working-class Girls in Victorian Scotland* (Routledge, 2005); L Patterson, *Schools and schooling: Vol.3, Mass education 1872-present* in M Lynch (ed), *The Oxford Companion to Scottish History* (Oxford University Press, 2001); J Scotland, *The History of Scottish Education: Vol.1, Beginning -1872; Vol.2, 1872-Present* (University of London Press, 1969).
- 2 An example of a grant calculation is illustrated in GM Clark, 'Black Isle School Log Books (1875-1919) – A Statistical Approach', *Scottish Local History*, 86, 2013, pp.8-15; and *The Local Historian*, 44(4), 2014, pp.277-89.
- 3 A very good example of an account of an unusual (and distressing) incident in which the head teacher of Ferintosh School attempted to save a pupil from drowning can be read in the School log book entry for 9 December 1884. Highland Archives CRC/5/3/15(b), pp.142-4.
- 4 Some examples are: *The Cullen School Log Books* (Cullen School, 1980); *The Kilchoan School Log Book 1916-1933* (West Ardnachurchan Booklet No.3, 2011); B MacLennan, *The Dominie's Diary: Strathcathro 1863-1964* (Strathcathro School, 2004); *Abercorn School – Jottings from the School Log 1898-1930* (Abercorn Primary School, 1972); *History of Dundee High School* (2 vols, 1984 and 1989); DR Morrison, *History of Kingussie School* (Kingussie School, 1966); *Aberdeen School Log Books 1864-1919* (Aberdeen Urban Studies Centre, 1986); W Boyd, *Education in Ayrshire Through Seven Centuries* (Scottish Council for Research in Education, 1961); E MacAskill, 'Tales from School Log Books', *Scottish Local History*, 59, 2003, pp.21-4.
- 5 As an example, Highland Archives holds 474 volumes of log books covering 189 schools in Inverness-shire, Ross and Cromarty and Sutherland, an average of 2.5 volumes per school. Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City Archives holds the log books of 510 schools within the ex-Grampian Region, an area that contains approximately 10% of the Scottish population. Applying an average of 2.5 volumes per school, this suggests that the total number of surviving Scottish school log books is probably approximately 12,750 volumes.
- 6 An excellent recent example is H Young, 'Contributing to the community debate: understanding social change in rural Scotland during the twentieth century', *The Local Historian*, 45(4), 2015, pp.321-35.
- 7 The author has personal experience of this – discovering from the Parkhouse (Angus) School log book that his father, a teacher at the school, had been absent for three months during 1934 due to hospitalisation with diphtheria.