

Writing any history can seem rather like delving into a babushka doll. Just when you think you have got to the heart of it you discover another layer of interest and complexity. This has certainly been the case in preparing this short account of the life of Pye Bank Church of England Aided Primary School and its many previous incarnations. The school as we know it today was born in 2002, the offspring of the amalgamation of Pye Bank Infant School and Pye Bank Holy Trinity Junior School.

The school is truly a remarkable place, full of diversity and excitement. It is perhaps not unique, but certainly unusual in so far as it is a church school with a strong Christian ethos that serves an almost entirely Muslim community. Over 90% of the pupils follow the Islamic faith. Most church school trust deeds declare the main purpose of the school to be “to educate and serve the poor of the parish” so essentially there would be no conflict of purpose. However, the school’s circumstances make for a fascinating and challenging place of learning. Some might question the relevance of a Church of England School in such a community, but the school keeps a concern for, and a celebration of, community cohesion at the heart of all it tries to achieve.

Well, the current school is just the most recent and most accessible part of that babushka doll. We need to peel away almost 175 years of history, layer by layer, if we want to get to the tiny seedling doll at its heart and discover the real origins of Pye Bank as a Church School. The account must begin in 1836, a long time before the 1870 Education Bill provided education for all.

Pitsmoor Day School

In 1836 most children did not go to school. It is estimated that just a fifth of Sheffield’s twenty four thousand children did so, mostly through the forty one Church and Charity Schools that existed. One of these was Pitsmoor Day School, opened in with money raised by public conscription and a grant from the 1833 School Bill. It was fourteen years later that the Parish Church arrived, but the school was truly the birth of church school education in Pitsmoor.

Pye Bank Board School

Pitsmoor Day School developed a fine reputation, but began to lose numbers when a Board School opened in 1875 to provide places for children under the Education Bill. Many children transferred, partly for geographical convenience and partly because families were excited by the prospect of brand new, purpose-built premises. The Board School was the first to take up the name Pye Bank.

The new Pye Bank Board School actually began life in premises at Bridgehouses in August 1874, whilst its new building was being completed at Nottingham Cliff. The

Wesleyan Day School that occupied the Bridgehouses site until then had a young headmaster, George Champley, and a forward looking Committee, concerned the building could not match the standards required by the 1870 Education Act. So, they offered it for rent to the Sheffield School Board on a temporary basis until the summer of 1875.

One hundred years later, Brian Bezant, long-time teacher at the school through the 1970s and '80s and eventually appointed headteacher in 1997, described the occasion. For Pitsmoor's Contact Magazine in an article to mark the school's Centenary he wrote:

"On a hot day in 1875, a procession of boys, led by a bearded gentleman in a dark suit and bowler hat, wound its way from Bridgehouses, up Rock Street to the splendid new building standing at the top of the hill.....the new buildings were eventually opened on 1st December, 1875 by Mrs Mark Firth with a large golden key set with jewels in the presence of Sir John Brown and Viscount Sandon."



The new school, *"perched on a cliff like an eagle's eyrie"* was divided into three. The Infants' department, and separate Boys and Girls junior departments each had their own headteacher and their own part of the school. Mr Champley took over as head of the Boys' School, holding the position until his death in 1911 – a thirty six year service!

As Pitsmoor grew, fuelled by industrial development, so did the need for school places. In 1881 a new Junior Department was opened at the Pitsmoor National

School, previously the Day School. Its early fine reputation and success was being maintained under the headship of Charles Cusworth. At this time a firm link was created between the two schools.

In 1883 two new wings were built on the north side of the main Pye Bank building providing eight larger rooms, but the population growth continued to outstrip provision and the accommodation problems were not really overcome until 1930 when the Burngreave Secondary Schools opened. Pye Bank School now operated with Infants downstairs and the junior boys and girls upstairs. The two junior departments were amalgamated in 1936 as Pye Bank Junior Mixed School under one headteacher.



The growth of the school was unstoppable. Even the Luftwaffe could not slow its progress, though it did its best. In December 1940 the school suffered severe bomb damage and was closed for five months whilst the roof was repaired. Many of the pupils were evacuated to Lincolnshire where they were accompanied and taught by some of their own teachers.

The teaching staff in 1943. The men were otherwise occupied.

Pye Bank Trinity Church of England Primary School

After the war Sheffield continued to grow and the school became overcrowded once more. In the 1970s mobile classrooms took up much of the playground space. Of course, the old Church connections were long forgotten, but against this background Diocesan plans to re-position an education arm in the area emerged.

The proposal, in 1969, to have a church school once more in Pitsmoor did not meet with universal approval. Several objections were made, with one writer declaring that education, "*should not be in the hands of a backward looking, decrepit organisation like the Church of England.*"

A door to door campaign led by Don Sparkes, the vicar of Christ Church, Pitsmoor, canvassing support for the school was pursued in direct opposition to atheistic and

humanist opposition led by the Pye Bank Neighbourhood Group and the editor of the local publication, Pitsmoor News.

A Church Army Captain of the time wrote:

“a very small number of objectors will endeavour to have Religious Education thrown out. They aim eventually to do away with the Christian faith of this country. Suddenly free speech will be gone and we shall live in fear and dictatorship.”

Within Sheffield Council support was also hard to find. Financial austerity as well as ideological arguments were constant threats. Alternative plans for *“the new Pye Bank Middle School to be built as a county school and the proposed Springwood School to be retained as an aided C of E school”* were put forward in February 1971.

And, it was not just non-believers who were disturbed by the notion of a Church of England School in Pitsmoor. Canon Henry Burgess, the Diocesan Director of Education, wrote of a more surprising objector. In a letter to the Very Reverend Robert Holtby of the National Society and Director of Education for the Church of England at the time, he wrote, *“There remains another enemy. He is.....a radical Methodist minister.”*

It seemed the Methodist Church was not comfortable with the idea, the minister in question declaring no proper consultation had taken place with the Methodist Church. However, history was on the Anglican church's side. As Don Sparkes wrote to Canon Burgess in June 1970, *“In the beginning Pye Bank School was Bridgehouses Church School and had been started in order to teach children to read so they could read the bible.”* Confidence that the school could be established was not high, however, and the Diocese began to look at an alternative site at Roe Wood in case the objectors were successful at Pye Bank.

Canon Burgess, the Reverend Sparkes and Mr A. E. Cook, the headteacher of Pye Bank at the time, continued to promote the idea, and thanks, in part, to the efforts of Don Sparkes a survey in July 1971 revealed 219 families in favour of the new school and only 7 against. Perhaps this helped influence the decision made by the then Secretary of State for Education, Mrs Margaret Thatcher. The Church was not disappointed. Canon Burgess wrote to the Director of the National Society, *“My Dear Holtby, you will be almost as pleased as I am to learn that the Department has found in our favour and the school will be a church aided school.”*

The new school was built on Andover Street, on the site of the former St Catherine's Roman Catholic School. Thus, Church School education was established in Pitsmoor – although really, it was really being re-established from much earlier times.

Pye Bank Trinity Church of England Junior School opened in the Autumn of 1976, built by Bramall and Ogden at a final cost of £343,000. The headteacher was Peter John Brittain and Chair of Governors the Reverend Don Sparkes, of Christ Church

Pitsmoor. A certain Mr David Smith was also on the governing body, and has been involved with the school ever since, playing the piano, coaching football and returning as a governor in June 2010!

Shortly after opening a dedication service led by Gordon Fellows, then Bishop of Sheffield included the hymn "God moves in mysterious ways His wonder to perform". Don Sparkes commented that the presence of the school was "*nothing more than a miracle as that year no other school building had been allowed in Sheffield due to the financial cutbacks*".

In February 1978, Peter Brittain resigned his post and moved to Peterborough to lead a new school, Winyates Primary School. Mr Brittain, a non-Christian wrote a letter to the Governing Body in which he declared his belief that Pye Bank Trinity deserved a Christian headteacher and this had been a key reason for his resignation.

For the next five years Brian Aket led the school before moving to Bury St Edmunds. Dave Lingard followed in 1983, overseeing the move from middle school to junior school in 1989. Brian Bezant stepped to the plate in 1997 after long service to the school as deputy and Rita Storr was appointed to be head of the newly amalgamated school in 2001.

Originally occupying the old infant school site, it moved to a new building and its current home on Andover Street in September 2004, covering the precise footprint upon which the junior school had stood.

The old, Victorian, Pye Bank Board School building is still standing. Though empty and disused, many visitors arrive there first, before realising their mistake and coming down the hill to find the modern building with its brightly coloured extension, added in 2008/09. As well as the new look building, designed by architect Ivan King in what he calls a 'village concept', they also find a changed community. Today, Somali, Yemeni and Pakistani families provide the vast majority of the pupils on roll. The school has worked hard to adapt to its changing circumstances.

Numbers are growing once more. By 2015 the school is expected to be two-form entry from F2 to Y6. Who knows what the future will bring with talk of academies and federations abounding in educational spheres. The next babushka doll is somewhere out there in the future. For today, operating with a logo that declares we are "Learning together; learning to be together", we continue to be proud of our long church school tradition.