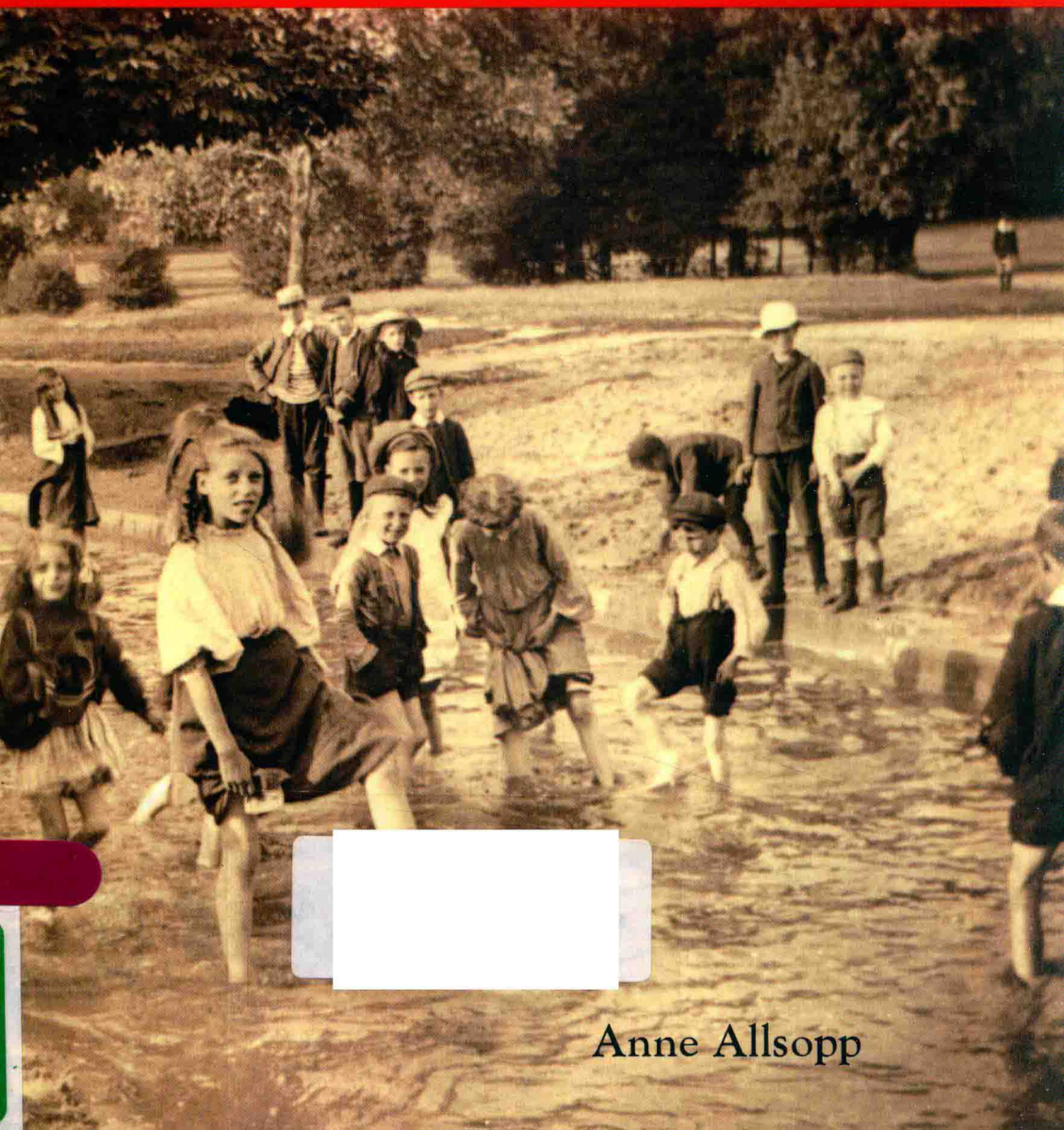


The Education and Employment of Girls in Luton, 1874–1924

WIDENING OPPORTUNITIES AND LOST FREEDOMS



Anne Allsopp

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THE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT
OF GIRLS IN LUTON
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AND
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THE BEDFORDSHIRE HISTORICAL RECORD SOCIETY

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Map of Luton and the hamlets May 1891
 Ordnance Survey 1" Bedfordshire
 Electrotpe taken in 1892
 Railways October 1889 [JD]

For my husband,
Basil

Acknowledgements

The choice of subject for this study was triggered by Dr Stephen Bunker who remarked that the education of Luton women had never been the subject of serious research. As I am 'a Luton girl' the idea of filling the gap appealed and this book is based on the subsequent doctoral thesis which I presented at the Institute of Education (University of London) where I was privileged to work with Emeritus Professor Richard Aldrich. I offer him my very sincere thanks for his unfailing kindness and support.

Much of the research was undertaken at Luton Museum and Art Gallery where I received willing help in my search for documents, pictures and other sources of information. I am particularly grateful to Dr Elizabeth Adey, Curatorial Staff, who has helped me with diligence and friendship throughout all the years it has taken me to finish this work. I also thank Mrs Marian Nichols who has an unparalleled knowledge of the hat industry and Mr Chris Grabham who helped to find photographs and put many of the illustrations on disc. Photographs from the Luton Museum Service are acknowledged as (LM) while those which originated with the *Luton News* and are held at the museum are acknowledged as (LM/LN).

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Luton High School for Girls was a significant part of the educational scene in Luton. Many of the archives remained in the school building, which is now occupied by Denbigh High School. With the permission of the headmistress, Mrs Yasmin Bevan, I was allowed to visit the school on many occasions to access useful documents. I have to thank the members of staff who helped me, most cheerfully and enthusiastically, and I am grateful to the governors of the school who subsequently gave permission for all the archives to be transferred to Luton Museum and Art Gallery for safe-keeping.

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to read these and also told me much more in lively conversations in her home. Sadly she died before this study was finished. However, I think she knew how much I appreciated her help. Similarly, other ladies have helped me with their memories; I thank Mrs Joyce Browne, Mrs Rosamond Hayward and Mrs Vera Robson.

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James Collett-White has edited this volume. He read it very carefully and gave much useful advice. He provided a different perspective, particularly on the relationship between Luton and the county town. I thank him too.

Throughout all these years my husband, Basil, has supported me and believed in me. Without his support the production of this book would have been very much more difficult.

Dr Anne Allsopp
May 2005

Abbreviations

ACP	Associate of the College of Preceptors
ARAM	Associate of the Royal Academy of Music
ARCM	Associate of the Royal College of Music
BCC	Bedfordshire County Council
BEC	Bedfordshire Education Committee
BHG	Beech Hill Girls' School
BHRS	Bedfordshire Historical Record Society
BLARS	Bedfordshire and Luton Archive and Record Service
CMO	County Medical Officer
CRO	County Record Office (now BLARS)
DHS	Denbigh High School
DRG	Denbigh Road Girls' School
FRCO	Fellow of the Royal College of Organists
HGS	Higher Grade School
HMI	His/Her Majesty's Inspector
HRG	Hitchin Road Girls' School
HRGI	Hitchin Road Girls' and Infants' School
HRI	Hitchin Road Infants' School
JD	James Dyer
JP	Justice of the Peace
LEA	Local Education Authority
LEC	Luton Education Committee
LHS	Luton High School for Girls
LL.A	Lady Literate in Arts
LMAG	Luton Museum and Art Gallery
LMS	Luton Modern School
LN	<i>The Luton News</i>
LSB	Luton School Board
LTC	Luton Town Council
MO	Medical Officer
NLCS	North London Collegiate School
NRS	Norton Road School
NTS	New Town Street School
P-t.	Pupil-teacher
RBA	Royal Society of British Artists
SMG	St Matthew's Girls' School
TC	Training College
TIC	Technical Instruction Committee
USDL	The Board of the United School District of Luton
VAD	Voluntary Aid Detachment
VD	Volunteer Decoration

Introduction

This book complements two others which have already been published in this series. Volume 78, *Strawopolis* (1999), looked at the transformation of Luton in the middle of the nineteenth century 'from a market town, where hats were made, to principally a manufacturing centre'. Volume 82, *Vauxhall Motors and the Luton Economy, 1900-2002* (2003), explored the life of the town in the twentieth century when the dominant hat industry was replaced by an equally dominant motor industry. This study (Volume 84) has concentrated on the changing role of women against these backgrounds.

The year 1874 was significant as it was the one in which the first Luton School Board was elected. In the same year education became compulsory for the town's children. New schools were built and by 1924 elementary schools were offering a wider and more stimulating style of curriculum. Of particular importance was the opening of a secondary school for girls under the leadership of a dedicated headmistress who brought new vision to the furtherance of higher education for girls. By 1924 the school had established a tradition of excellence and had laid foundations for the future. This book has therefore concentrated on the years between 1874 and 1924.

The focus of this study was originally intended to be the provision of schooling, but it soon became clear that the demands of the traditional hat industry and those of the School Board were closely intertwined. The theme therefore ceased to be education alone but the fascinating relationship between education and the changing patterns of employment for women.

Luton itself is worthy of serious study because its character is in some respects unique. In 1874 political power in the town lay with businessmen, mostly self-made, who ruled over every aspect of urban life and saw that prosperity could be achieved within the hat trade and without academic qualifications. Consequently, before 1874, education, particularly for girls, had not been given high priority. This is reflected in illiteracy rates in Luton, which, in 1856, were 44% opposed to the national average of 35%.

One reason for this was the existence of a domestic industry which dominated children's lives. Women, too, could spend the whole of their working lives in the hat industry and they were undoubtedly central to the prosperity of the town. Whether or not Luton could be described as matriarchal is open to debate. From an economic and numerical point of view, however, and also when women's role within the family is considered, it may well be true to say that Luton was a matriarchal town.

By 1924 the employment scene had changed and the wealth of the town was based on a much wider range of industries. Women were being employed in some capacities in these new industries, usually because they were cheaper to employ than men, but it has to be asked why they chose to do so. The role of women was being transformed from a dominant to a more subsidiary one. Their old freedoms were being lost, but new opportunities eventually brought another kind of freedom. The

main theme of this research concerns the working classes, but the lives of the more affluent middle classes are also considered.

By 1924 Luton had also been influenced by the Education Acts of 1870, 1902 and 1918 and by two major wars. The daughters of women who had grown up within the boundaries of the hat industry now accepted the constraints of compulsory education and looked to wider horizons. Commerce and industry offered new opportunities and, for the few, a college education was a possibility.

While it is not the intention to make a detailed study of Bedford, it is nevertheless important at appropriate points to look at the relationship between an independently minded Luton and the more conservative county town whose prosperity was to a large extent based on the success of the endowed Harpur Trust schools. By 1903 Bedfordshire County Council had assumed responsibility for technical, secondary and continuing education, as well as elementary schooling in the hamlets of Luton: Hyde, Leagrave, Limbury-cum-Biscot and Stopsley.

Chapter One looks at Luton's religious, political and economic background and the influences which created the town's independent and distinctive character. It demonstrates how Luton, unlike Bedford, did not have a strong tradition of schooling, but responded conscientiously to external pressures. The importance of the hat trade in Luton is crucial, especially in relation to the economic power of women.

In Chapter Two women's employment is considered from another perspective. Census figures were assessed, *Kelly's Directories* were looked at in an attempt to record developments in private enterprise while newspaper advertisements give an indication of the changing attitudes of employers and employees.

Although the introduction of Sunday schools preceded the date chosen for the start of this research, their contribution to the education of the working classes can never be over-estimated. In Chapter Three a study is made of the way the movement flourished in Luton, with the result that many thousands of children received basic schooling within their folds. Sunday schools also had a considerable influence on the social life of the town throughout the period under consideration.

The School Board era is addressed in Chapter Four. The responses of the School Board and of Luton parents and pupils to such matters as compulsory school attendance, half-time education, Labour Certificates and the teaching of needlework are examined.

Another form of employment, open to intelligent working-class girls who wished to continue their education, was pupil-teaching. Questions are asked as to why girls chose to become teachers rather than follow their peers into the hat trade, which offered a more independent way of life. Chapter Five describes the provision of training within the elementary school system and some case studies have been compiled.

In Chapter Six the increasing involvement of Bedfordshire County Council with the education of children aged over fourteen is examined. This includes technical and evening education and the training of monitors, pupil-teachers and student teachers.

Schooling in the early twentieth century, which was the shared responsibility of Bedfordshire and Luton, is assessed in Chapter Seven. The widening curriculum, education for children with special needs and the ideology of teaching girls to

assume a domestic role are considered, particularly in the context of Empire and war. Emphasis is also given to the relationship between education and broader employment opportunities through the work of the Juvenile Employment Agency.

Rural schools, while sharing many of the experiences of urban schools, had their own set of problems, many of them based on their isolation and the fact that they were often considered to have a lower status. Luton and the hamlets are ideally suited to a study of this kind because after 1903 the Bedfordshire Education Committee administered the hamlet schools, while the urban schools remained the responsibility of the Luton Education Committee (LEC). The particular identity of the rural schools is noted in Chapter Eight.

Chapter Nine is concerned with the wide variety of both formal and informal provision, which suited girls' hopes and aspirations, perceived needs, religious beliefs and social expectations.

Chapter Ten is crucial because it focuses on the establishment of secondary education, which was, at least in theory, offered for the first time to children from poorer families. Attitudes towards the secondary school, which was inevitably élitist, are considered and it is interesting to contemplate whether the town and the school lived comfortably together.

The Conclusion demonstrates the extent to which Luton's unique character had changed by 1924. Girls were undoubtedly enjoying an increasing range of educational and employment opportunities, but many of their traditional freedoms and much of their economic independence had diminished.

Contents

	<i>Page</i>
List of Illustrations	ix
List of Tables	xi
Acknowledgements	xv
Abbreviations	xvii
Introduction	xix
Chapter One	
Luton: <i>Scientiae et labori detur</i>	1
Chapter Two	
Further Perspectives Concerning Employment Patterns for Women	33
Chapter Three	
Sunday Schools	46
Chapter Four	
Education in the Time of the School Board	62
Chapter Five	
Teaching: An Alternative Occupation	93
Chapter Six	
Teacher Training and the Education of Students Aged Over Fourteen Under Bedfordshire County Council	118
Chapter Seven	
Elementary Education 1903–1924	140
Chapter Eight	
Rural Schools	169
Chapter Nine	
Learning and Living	191
Chapter Ten	
Secondary Education for Girls	220

Conclusion	244
Appendix	249
Bibliography	253
Index	267

Illustrations

Frontispiece

Map of Luton and the hamlets 1891

Page

Chapter One

1a/b.	Population graphs of Britain, Bedfordshire and Luton	4
2.	Sangers' Circus procession 1898	10
3.	Hat sewing room in an unidentified factory c.1907	16
4.	C.H. Osborne's Dyework & Hat Factory 1907–1908	17
5.	Girls trimming boaters 1911	18
6.	Band rehearsing for the opening ceremony at the CWS Cocoa Works 1902	26
7a/b.	Munitions workers at George Kent Ltd	29
8.	Machining grenades, Davis Gas Stove Co. Ltd	30
9.	Hewlett and Blondeau (Aircraft), Leagrave, 1918	31

Chapter Three

10.	Limbury Baptist Church Sunday School 1918	54
-----	---	----

Chapter Four

11.	Map of the Borough of Luton 1876	63
12.	The Battle of the Children's Rights 1877	66
13.	Map showing the site of Hyde School 1901	70
14.	Circular about infectious diseases 1892	76
15.	Children celebrating the coronation of Edward VII 1902	84
16.	Needle Drill	86
17.	Menu for Luton Cookery Classes	90

Chapter Five

18.	Extract from <i>Mental Arithmetic for Pupil Teachers</i> (1887)	98
19.	Extract from <i>Friendly Advice for Pupil Teachers</i> (c.1877)	100

Chapter Seven

20a/b/c.	Schemes of Work from the logbook of Hitchin Road Girls' School 1902–1919	151, 152, 153
21a/b/c.	Pages from Lillie Squires' exercise book, Leagrave, 1909–10	156, 157, 158

Chapter Eight

22.	Dorothy Thorne, monitress at Stopsley School	184
23.	Ethel Toyer, monitress at Stopsley School	184

Chapter Nine

24.	The National School in Church Street	193
25.	Luton Adult Schools' Jubilee Celebration 1912	196
26.	VADs at Wardown House 1918	202
27.	St Dominic's Convent School	207

Chapter Ten

28.	Map of Luton 1904	221
29.	Map of Luton 1915	222
30.	Park Square c.1906	224
31.	Helen K. Sheldon	234