

Teaching about my school in the past using original sources

or

why would I want those old books in my classroom?

Sarah Leach

Introduction

It has always been recognised that good primary history is able to connect the past with the world the children currently inhabit. That is why focusing on schools can be so useful. If there is one experience the children have definitely had, it is experiencing school life, so there are immediately possibilities for first-hand comparisons with school life in the past.

The history of education, while arguably fascinating in its own right, can also throw up many ideas for cross-curricular work within the modern classroom, and you can gain some of those ideas just by using a pile of grubby old books!

The school where you teach may have a small archive of its own, and there lurking among the dusty tomes could be an undiscovered freely-available resource for teaching and learning. If your school is a more modern building it may have been replaced or been merged with an older school, and the records held previously will still be held somewhere: it will just require a little

research to track them down. If the records are lost or your school is entirely new, you can still find records from other schools at your local library, educational or community archive, or other places where they can lend you materials such as Artemis Leeds.

What kind of grubby old books?

Log books

One of the best sources of investigating school history is by looking at log books. A log book is a school diary and so much more. It is effectively a comprehensive written account of all the events, activities and happenings of any significance within the school. Just as a captain of a ship is required to write a 'captain's log', schools for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had to keep a record of some of the main issues affecting the school. The one I use is a huge volume, and it runs from 1896 to 1940. It is a delightful and informative way of gleaning snippets of social history which bring each school year to life. Here are some examples:

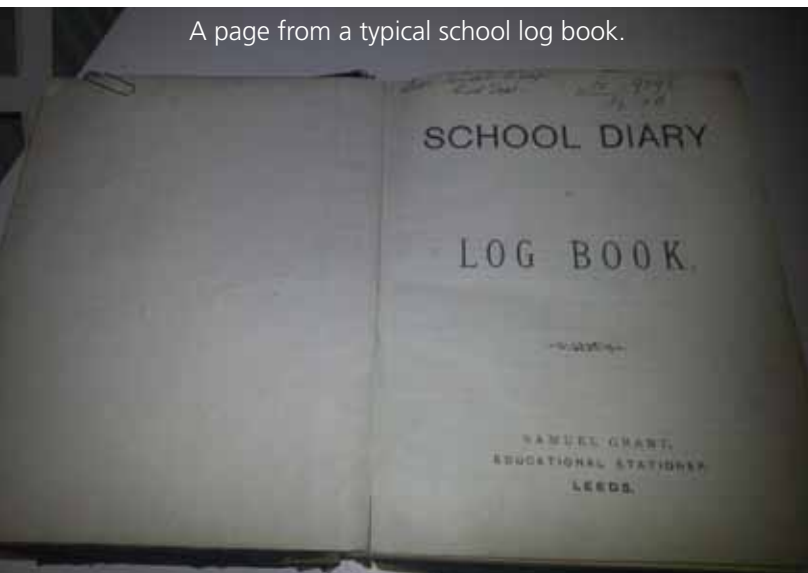
Aug 21 1896, School re-opened on Monday. Four scholars admitted. Visit of Reverend manager daily. Received specimens and charts for object lessons.

Nov 6, Attendance thin on Thursday and Friday as the weather was extremely cold and wet.

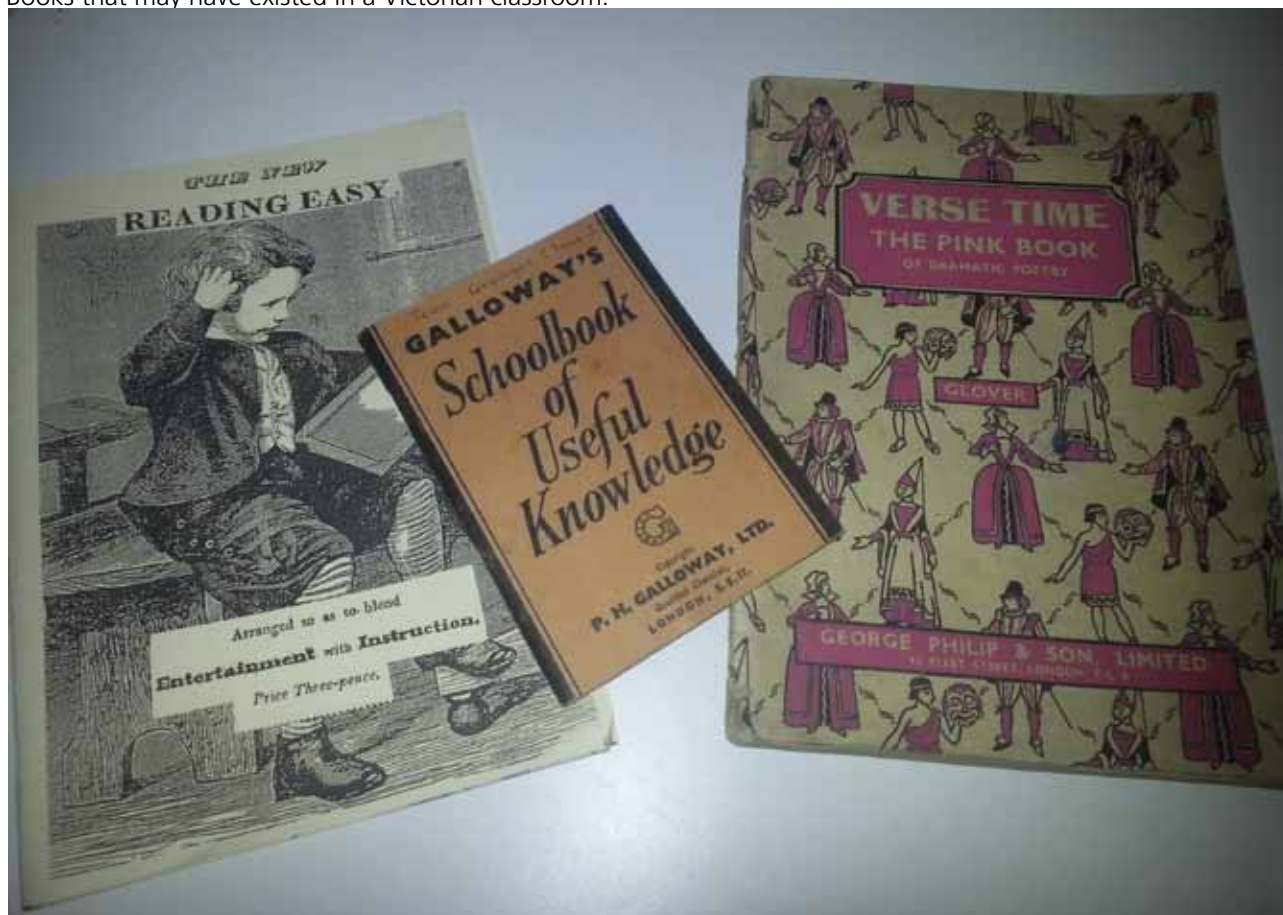
31st Jan 1928, 100 senior girls and three teachers attended the Museum lecture on "Wonders of the Sea" by M. Crowther. Fourteen girls attended the Lord Mayor's tea party.

Log books often provide insights into national and international history. Looking at log books during wartime such as the Boer War, First World War and Second World War can show how these wars impinged upon local communities.

A page from a typical school log book.



Books that may have existed in a Victorian classroom.



Attendance books

These are registers of attendance and reasons for absence. They illustrate the differences through the years. Attendance up to the 1880s was not compulsory, and had to be paid for ('school pence'). Attendance picks up when it becomes a legal requirement to attend, but is still low, and the registers record the efforts of attendance officers and teachers in their struggle to keep numbers healthy. Non-attendances and rewards for attendance are recorded a great deal both here and in the log books and the thinking is actually very similar to the developments in our own schools over recent years. They are also an excellent resource of old names and diseases which classes love, especially if some of the surnames still exist in the area today.

Admission books

These list those arriving and leaving the school. Details vary but usually there are details of where a child (and their family) came from or where they went next. This allows pupils to trace movement. They might also be able to speculate on why people left. In some areas, the arrivals and departures involved migration perhaps due to economic circumstances. Sadly they also reflect mortality. Although the children should not be led to believe that pupils in past times were constantly dying, mortality rates were higher than today and causes of death are usually given.

Punishment books

A great resource to bring a bit of 'horrible history' into the classroom. In the 'historical schoolroom' here in Leeds the cane, finger stocks and punishment books are guaranteed to stir up excitement and interest, and are the most asked-about resource among the children in the out-of-role discussion at the end of every session. Each time a child received corporal punishment in any form, the punishment, along with the offence, was recorded in this book. It serves as an interesting illustration of historical attitudes within schools. For example: 'biting a boys finger – two strokes of the cane', 'repeated insolence – two strokes of the cane', 'writing with the left hand – three strokes of the cane'. Incidents such as 'slapping about the head' are also recorded and it always engenders lively discussion when read out in class.

Old photographs

Often a neglected source of information, they show the dress style (particularly school and class photos), attitudes and emotions involved and often the types of lessons and school settings that were used. They are great for comparison and discussion between what existed in the past and their lives today.

Old text and story books

These are an excellent resource, one of the best, and contain a wealth of practical concrete information

about the activities involved in the day-to-day life of schools throughout history. Also possible within this category are old pupils exercise books.

While this article is largely about written sources, artefacts may also be useful as shown in the photograph below.



Objects from a Victorian classroom.

How can the school use this topic within the National Curriculum?

It is a topic that can be useful at Key Stage 1 or Key Stage 2 – even within the foundation curriculum. The sources can often be made accessible to very young children.

- changes within living memory – such as comparing school life now, in their parents' and grandparents' times or using the memories of older members of staff
- significant events, people and places in their own locality – the local school can be seen as a significant place and teachers important members of the community
- a Key Stage 2 local history study
- a study of an aspect or theme in British history that extends pupils' chronological understanding beyond 1066 – such as education through the ages focusing on changes, perhaps going back to Greek or Roman times but looking at aspects of education in Tudor or Victorian times, wartime and today.

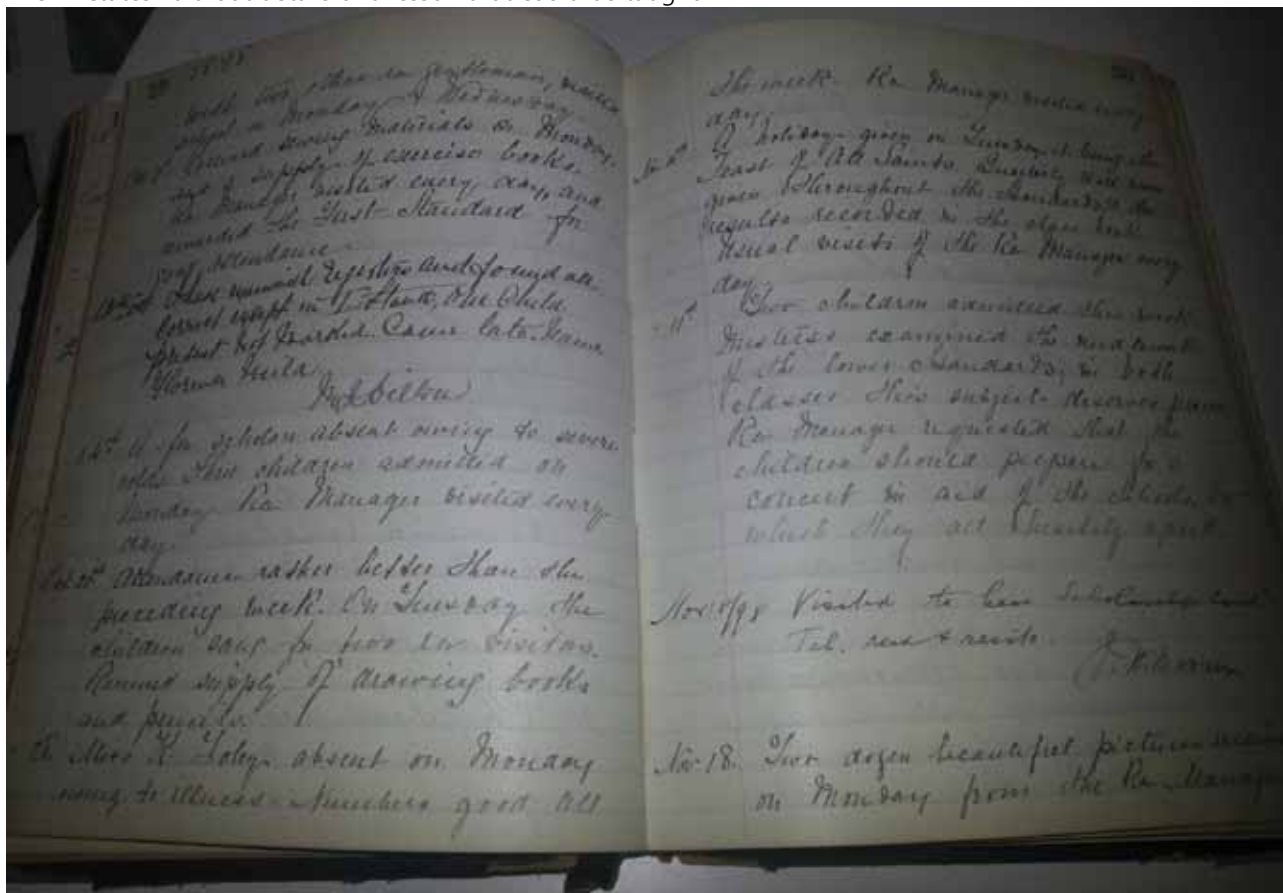
There are some potentially exciting enquiries such as:

- How pleasant was life in schools in this area 100 years ago?
- If a pupil from [a date in the past] were transported here today, how different would schools seem to them?
- From the evidence you have, describe a typical day in a Victorian school.
- How much did an event (e.g. war) matter to children at this time? (looking at how the war impinged upon children through examining sources such as log books).
- Does much seem to have changed between [first date in the past] and [second date in the past]?
- What can we learn about teachers OR attendance OR lessons OR punishments (some aspect of education in the past)?
- Can you remember looking at children in other topics we have covered (e.g. Greece, Rome)? What do you think are the main similarities and differences between any education then and what you have just studied?
- Which period of history seems to have had the best schools? Do give reasons why you have made this choice.

Using enquiries such as this, it is possible to have some really engaging activities that help develop historical understanding. For example:

- Compare a modern and a historical register (attendance book) looking at the reasons for absence and asking children to make inferences about illness and even attitudes towards going to school. It might also be useful to compare attendance registers from different types of school such as those with rich and those with poor children, those in the countryside and those in towns.
- Give each pupil the name of a pupil on the historical register and ask them to imagine their life for the day – such as what happened to them, what they felt about things. The work should be based on evidence.
- Compare how registers were kept then with now such as comparing methods of data storage and efficiency.
- Use a series of extracts from the log book. Ask pupils to make some deductions about how schools were run, lessons, the teachers and children. How different are things today? Can they explain the reasons for any differences? The number of extracts and the language can be selected depending on the ages and abilities of the class.
- Produce a log book which might be relevant to the school today (even over a period of time). Discuss

The 'Dictates' laid out details of a lesson that could be taught.



what historians in the future might be able to learn from it.

- Compare photographs of a class in the past and today – the task could be made a little more challenging by comparing the class from more than two dates so that they can detect and try to explain changes.
- Using old volumes of *Popular Educator*, which many schools used in the past and which contained lesson plans for every day in geography, botany, French, handwriting, mathematics, a lesson could be replicated (or even a day) with pupils using old resources such as fountain pens. Schools were very fond of 'Dictates' where they copied out poems, sayings, facts and figures, using 'finest scrip'. The pupils then signed the work at the bottom. Class could do modern-day 'dictates' or simply copy an old one from the resource. Similarly the pupils could attempt old mathematics lessons with tables, old ways of recording sums (maths) or moral verse 'dictates' for RE or PHSE.

Some pitfalls to be aware of

While so much can be achieved using these sources and topics, a little care should be exercised. Politically incorrect language and ideas in all old books are an issue as is some Victorian phraseology which can be particularly embarrassing or condescending. All extracts need to be checked before handing them out. The writing in many originals or transcripts of originals can be particularly challenging to read. A typed-out accompaniment may help in some cases. There may even be health and safety issues. Check for bugs and mould before using old documents; you may need to

wear gloves to protect yourself and the item. Care also needs to be taken with some of the information. In some places local families mentioned in documents such as punishment books still exist and sensitivity needs to be shown.

Most of the examples referred to above can be carried out in any classroom. Even if the school has not kept any records – many have been encouraged to deposit them in the local archives – transcripts are often available. Many are available electronically these days. It may well be that the whole thing can be made even more authentic by a visit to an old schoolroom. A surprising number of museums have reconstructed schoolrooms and opportunities to engage in re-enactments.

Conclusion

Children looking at their local school through a close investigation of sources make an ideal theme for children. It is one they can relate to but also the theme allows for the development of historical understanding, skills and knowledge. It allows concepts such as change, similarity and difference to be addressed, for accessible evidence to be used and for linking the local, national and even global perspectives. The sources can be of many types – written, pictorial, artefacts, reconstructions and oral history. It all makes for a worthwhile and stimulating topic that can actually include some original research.

Sarah Leach is Teacher in Residence, Historical Schoolroom, Leeds Industrial Museum at Armley Mills. The Historical Schoolroom is a service provided by Artemis, who are in turn part of Artforms Leeds.