Schooling before the 19th Century

There was no national system of education before the 19th century, and only a small section of the child population received any schooling. Opportunities for a formal education were restricted mainly to town grammar schools, charity schools and 'dame' schools.

Where they existed at all, schools had been established through the initiative of wealthy local benefactors or people who saw it as a means of making a living, and little else.

Grammar schools

Grammar schools were usually civic foundations going back to Tudor times or earlier, and in most cases had been endowed from the fortunes of merchants. Newer foundations copied the older grammar school, took fees, and were run on commercial lines, advertising their services in newspapers. They saw themselves as part of a growing market for education, but were often built on precarious finances and failed to survive for very long.

Charity schools

Charity schools were less formal institutions and were geared chiefly towards the poorer sections of society. Many of them in fact owed their existence to the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), founded in 1699. It was an expressed aim of the Society to spread Christian knowledge as a form of missionary activity.

During the 18th century the Society's leaders created schools for the poor in the 7-11 age group wherever it could. It is from these schools that the modern concept of primary and secondary education has grown. The SPCK also concerned itself with the training of teachers, and to some extent introduced a sense of professionalism to teaching.

Other schools

Other types of local school are often grouped under the heading of 'dame schools'. These were often run by old ladies or retired soldiers who for small fees taught the basic 'three Rs' - reading, writing and arithmetic - to the children of poorer tradesmen.

There were also, of course, the great public schools, of which Eton, Harrow and Westminster were pre-eminent, but these were financially out of reach to all but wealthy members of the ruling class.

Elementary education in the 19th century

During the late 18th century, Sunday schools held at church or chapel became widely popular, receiving much charitable backing from the middle classes. They provided children from poor families with another opportunity to receive some basic learning, usually the ability to read.

Basic learning

The promoters of Sunday schools also became involved in the provision of regular day schools, and in 1811 the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor was formed to try to develop schooling in the growing industrial towns. The society was a Church of England body, and was able to make use of the parish organisation of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) and its 230 schools.

In 1814 the British and Foreign School Society was founded and catered for the children of nonconformist parents.

Children in Factories

The two societies worked closely with factory reformers to limit children’s hours of work, and felt that young children should attend school at the very least on a part-time basis. In 1833 new legislation was enacted which restricted the employment of children in factories, and in the same year the House of Commons approved a grant of £20,000 to the two voluntary bodies. It was the very first occasion on which government assistance to schools was given.
It was a small sum, but there was increasing concern about the dangers of ignoring the moral well-being of children. In 1834 the report on the Poor Law made it clear to parliamentarians that there was a duty on the government 'to promote the religious and moral education of the labouring classes'. In particular it was felt that literacy needed to be extended so that working people had the power to understand their responsibilities as citizens.

**Grant**

By 1857 the annual grant was well over £500,000, and a government department was set up to oversee expenditure. Following the report of a parliamentary commission in 1861, an increase in the state grant was paid, but it was allocated to schools partly on the basis of examination results conducted by school inspectors. From the teaching point of view this was, of course, far from satisfactory. It also meant that rural and industrial areas which had no schools usually remained without them.

### The 1870 Education Act

In the 1860s the annual funding allocated for schools by Parliament exceeded £800,000. But there was growing pressure for the state to provide schools in areas where none existed. One of the chief stumbling blocks was the vested interests of religious societies. There was conflict of opinion over whether the state should pay for schools run by particular religious denominations, or whether schools should have no association with any denomination.

#### School funding

**National Education League**

Matters began to move forward, however, in 1869 when the recently formed National Education League began its campaign for free, compulsory and non-religious education for all children.

The views expressed by industrialists that mass education was vital to the nation's ability to maintain its lead in manufacture carried considerable weight in Parliament. A Bill which met many, but not all, of the League's wishes was drafted and introduced by W. E. Forster, and quickly passed.

**1870 Education Act**

The 1870 Education Act stands as the very first piece of legislation to deal specifically with the provision of education in Britain. Most importantly, it demonstrated a commitment to provision on a national scale.

The Act allowed voluntary schools to carry on unchanged, but established a system of 'school boards' to build and manage schools in areas where they were needed. The boards were locally elected bodies which drew their funding from the local rates. Unlike the voluntary schools, religious teaching in the board schools was to be 'non-denominational'. A separate Act extended similar provisions to Scotland in 1872.

**More Education Acts**

The issue of making education compulsory for children had not been settled by the Act. The 1876 Royal Commission on the Factory Acts recommended that education be made compulsory in order to stop child labour. In 1880 a further Education Act finally made school attendance compulsory between the ages of five and ten, though by the early 1890s attendance within this age group was falling short at 82 per cent.

Many children worked outside school hours - in 1901 the figure was put at 300,000 - and truancy was a major problem due to the fact that parents could not afford to give up income earned by their children.

Fees were also payable until a change in the law in 1891. Further legislation in 1893 extended the age of compulsory attendance to 11, and in 1899 to 12.

Compulsory education was also extended to blind and deaf children under the Elementary Education (Blind and Deaf Children) Act of 1893, which established special schools. Similar provision was made for physically-impaired children in the Elementary Education (Defective and Epileptic Children) Act of 1899.
Further reform, 1902-14

By the 1890s, over 2,500 new school boards had been created in England and Wales under the 1870 legislation. But there were also some 14,000 committees of management for individual voluntary schools.

Managing schools

This dual system of elementary education was uneven in administrative terms, and voluntary schools were often at a financial disadvantage since they were funded not from the local rates but by direct government grants.

In 1902 Parliament passed a new Education Act, drafted by AJ Balfour (who became prime minister later that year) which radically reorganised the administration of education at local level. It abolished the school boards in England and Wales. All elementary schools were placed in the hands of local education authorities under the control of the county and county borough councils (which had been established in 1888).

In Scotland the school boards survived until 1918 when they were replaced by elected county authorities, and in 1929 by the county councils.

Secondary education

The Act also, for the first time, made significant provision for secondary and technical education. Councils were encouraged, though not compelled, to subsidise existing grammar schools and to provide free places for working-class children. More ambitiously, they could set up new secondary 'grammar' schools. The expansion of secondary education was slow to develop, however, and the schools tended to cater mainly for the middle classes.

Welfare at school

There was much concern both within and outside Parliament that there should be more measures to ensure that children were healthier. In 1906 needy schoolchildren received further assistance under the Education (Provision of Meals) Act. It allowed local authorities to provide meals free of charge when parents could not afford to pay. This power was extended by later Acts, and made compulsory by the Education Act 1944.

The Education (Administrative Provisions) Act of 1907 required education authorities to see that all schoolchildren under their care received a medical inspection.

Extension of education, 1914-39

By 1914 Britain had a basic educational system, though for most schoolchildren it did not take them beyond the elementary age limit of 12.

World War One

During the course of the First World War the system was closely investigated by H.A.L Fisher, the president of the board of education. Fisher travelled around the country inspecting schools in villages, towns and cities. He became aware of a critical problem of under-financing.

Fisher's far-sighted plans for change and improvement were embodied in the wide-ranging Education Act of 1918 which aimed to meet the growing demand for improvements in the availability of education, and improved standards. He favoured the principle that education was vital not only to the individual, but also to society.

After the war

The 1918 Act raised the school leaving age from 12 to 14 and made provision for a system of part-time 'continuation day' classes for those in work aged 14-18. It abolished all fees in state elementary schools and widened the provision of medical inspection, nursery schools, and special needs education.
The greater part of the financial burden of education - some 60 per cent - was transferred from the local authorities to central government. This was partly to foster a greater sense of professionalism among teachers by allowing them improved salaries and pensions.

However, many of these innovative changes could only be implemented in part, or not at all, due to cuts in public expenditure forced by the economic depression of the 1920s.

A series of reports commissioned by the board of education considered how secondary education should be shaped for the future. But a lack of resources prevented any significant change until after the Second World War.

**The Education Act of 1944**

The plans for post-war secondary education in Britain aimed to remove the inequalities which remained in the system. The proportion of 'free places' at grammar schools in England and Wales increased from almost a third to almost half between 1913 and 1937. However, when poorer children were offered free places, parents often had to turn them down owing to the extra costs involved.

The Education Act of 1944 was steered through Parliament by the Education Minister, R.A. Butler, and was followed by a similar Act for Scotland in 1945. The Act provided free secondary education for all pupils.

**Local Education Authorities (LEAs)**

Local Education Authorities were required to submit proposals to the new Department of Education for reorganising secondary schooling in their areas.

Most LEAs aimed to establish the three main 'streams' or categories of school - grammar, secondary modern and technical - which had been recommended in a Report by Sir William Spens in 1938. Children would be allocated on the basis of an examination at the age of 11, known as the '11 plus'. This was intended to provide equal opportunities for children of all backgrounds.

The school leaving age was raised to 15, though the stated intention that it should be 16 was not effected until 1972.

**Education Reform Act 1988**

The 1944 Education Act had raised the school leaving age to 15 and provided free secondary education for all pupils. However not all of the Act's objectives were put into practice. The provision for 'technical' education was often lost sight of and was hardly ever implemented.

**Secondary modern schools**

Many Local Education Authorities (LEAs) tended to run a two-tiered system of grammar and secondary modern schools, with keen competition for limited numbers of grammar school places. By the 1960s many LEAs were establishing 'comprehensive' schools which catered for all abilities but modelled themselves in their early years on the traditional ethos of the grammar school.

**State education**

The 1944 Act nevertheless provided the main framework for state education for four decades in Britain until the radical changes implemented by the Education Reform Act of 1988. This legislation allowed both primary and secondary schools to opt out of local authority control and be funded by central government.

About a quarter of all state schools chose to reconstitute themselves along these lines. However, under further legislation in 1998 these 'grant maintained schools' were abolished and replaced by 'foundation schools' which have greater autonomy over their affairs.