

**150 Years of Service:
A History of Christ Church School,
Lancaster 1875-2025**



Matt Cole

“This new school, which has been opened five months, is already well attended and seems likely to supply a real need. The children are orderly, neat and well-behaved, and show a highly satisfactory amount of knowledge for new scholars. The buildings are ample and well-fitted.”

Her Majesty’s Inspectors, 31 July 1875

“What has been said hitherto, for more years than one cares to count, need only be said once more: that the methods employed, the lessons given, and the assimilation of the latter by the children, along with the order maintained and the general tone of the school, constitute a state of things which is dangerously close to perfection.”

Rev Kerr Cooper, Diocesan Inspection Report, 4 February 1919

“Church schools have played a very big part in English education, and many of the leaders of the country have come from them. Some have fallen by the wayside for lack of support, and others have, by the devotion and hard work of Christian people, retained their identity. Christ Church is one of that number. The site and location of the new school are excellent, and we look forward to the time when the building will be completed, and the school will be able to carry on with its firm traditions, maintaining the excellent progress which has been apparent throughout its history.”

Councillor Margery Lovett-Horn, Mayor of Lancaster, 14 October 1961

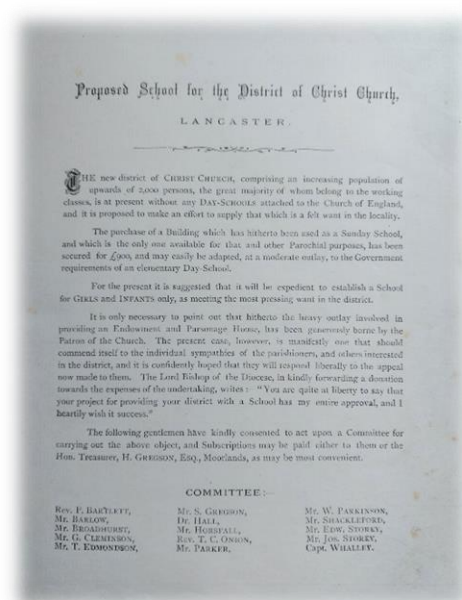
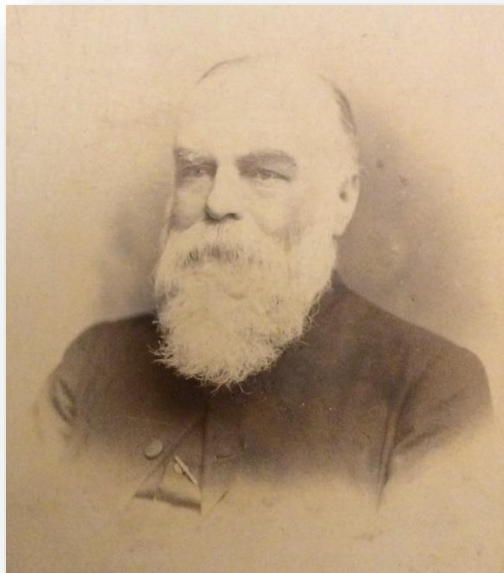
“This House congratulates Lancaster Christ Church Primary School on celebrating 150 years educating the young people of Lancaster; notes that the school was founded in 1875 and the Christian principles on which it was founded are still important today as they enjoy close links with the parish of Christ Church; and wishes the children and staff of the school a joyous anniversary year as they support the education and personal development of future Lancastrians.”

House of Commons Early Day Motion 185, 7 October 2024

Origins

Christ Church School was founded 150 years ago to meet the changing needs of the community around it, and has continued to do so ever since. The school's origins in 1875 lie in three great changes underway in Britain at the time: population growth, the desire for self-improvement, and the hardships of life in Victorian industrial towns.

At the time Lancaster was growing fast – by half its size between 1870 and 1900 – and the population of Bulk Ward in particular multiplied six times as houses sprang up in Freehold and along Park Road to house workers in the four huge mills, a chemical works and a brewery at the bottom of Moor Gate. One of the urgent needs being recognised as a result of this was for schools for the children in industrial towns and cities: barely half of British women and two-thirds of men were literate, and 1870 saw the work of the National Education League drive the passage of Forster's Education Act providing for the establishment of School Boards offering council-funded education. In Lancaster as elsewhere, most children had no access to elementary schooling, with only a handful of charity and private academies, or Sunday schools, available. It was the Church which had taken the lead in founding schools in Lancaster through Victoria's reign, and Christ Church was the fifth of these.



The Rev. Philip Bartlett and his 1874 proposal for a new school

Christ Church was established in 1857 with a mission of active social work as a chapel of the nearby workhouse and a place of worship for boys at the Grammar School. In 1874 its Vicar, Rev. Philip Bartlett, appealed for funds to provide an elementary school serving the local community:

The new district of Christ Church, comprising an increasing population of upwards of 2,000 persons, the great majority of whom belong to the working classes, is at present without any day-schools attached to the Church of England, and it is proposed to make an effort to supply that which is a felt want in the local community.

Rev. Bartlett recruited a committee including local notables from the Storey and Gregson families, as well as the man who was soon to be Mayor of Lancaster, and in a matter of months just over £1,000 was raised to buy and adapt the school building at the top of Moor Gate, and to employ a School Mistress at £100 a year. School was not free – Infants paid 2d. and Juniors 3d. a week (about a penny

in modern coinage, but only a fraction of the value) – each week, and children who were in arrears were sometimes sent home; but the parish and its supporters continued to subsidise this cost. The school opened its doors on 25 January 1875, and though a full timetable was not practical at first – early lessons from visiting teachers had thematic titles such as ‘A Feather’ or ‘Colour’ – standards were quickly set in arithmetic, writing, grammar, geography, drawing, sewing, singing and scripture, the last of which Rev Bartlett made the first of his regular visits to test that week. By June Christ Church had over a hundred pupils, entered four girls for public exams, and the following month received a complimentary first report from Her Majesty’s Inspectorate:

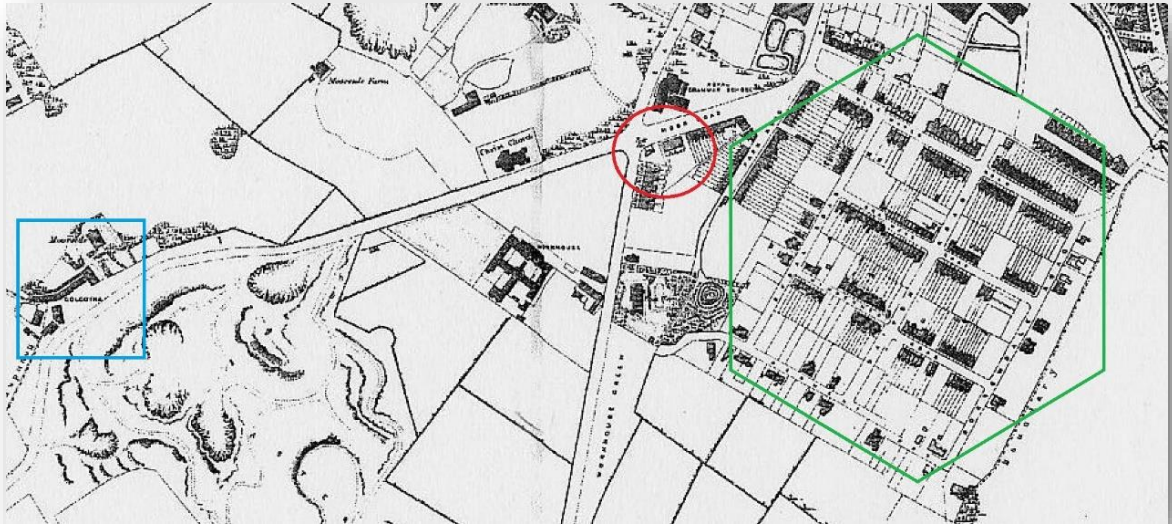
This new school, which has been opened five months, is already well attended and seems likely to supply a real need. The children are orderly, neat and well-behaved, and show a highly satisfactory amount of knowledge for new scholars. Sewing is very good. The buildings are ample and well-fitted.



The home of Christ Church School at the top of Moor Gate from 1875 until the 1990s

On the day that Christ Church School opened the need identified by Rev. Bartlett was reflected in the number and range of families who sent their children to enrol. That day 47 arrived, to be joined by four more later in the week. The details of those who took places in the first week show the urgent and growing need for the provision of both education and more general support for families.

Two-thirds of pupils were girls, only Infant boys being admitted at first. All lived within easy walking distance of the school building, the larger groups living at Golgotha, Park Road, and – nearly a third of the total – Grasmere Road, then still not complete. Most joined from other schools, suggesting they invested high hopes in Christ Church: the majority had been at St Anne’s at the bottom of Moor Gate, but some had been at other church schools, a few at National or dame schools, and one boy’s origins were recorded simply as “Roman Catholic.” The children’s ages ranged from two to twelve, so the teachers had to prepare older pupils to leave for work, whilst providing for thirteen pupils – all five or below – who had never been at school before.



This section from Harrison's map of Lancaster in 1877 shows the location of Christ Church School (circled in red), Golgotha (in the blue square), and Park Square and Freehold (in green), still under development. The streets around Christ Church itself were yet to be built.

This last group of 'early years' pupils is perhaps most surprising. Forster's 1870 Education Act set the terms for publicly-funded education of children between five and twelve; but Christ Church's first roll included 26 children below that range, fourteen of whom would not even have reached Reception age today. This promised a busy future for the school and suggests that parents were keen to secure places for their children; but it also reflected the parish's readiness to go beyond the requirements of the law, and also the harsh demands of industrial life on families in Lancaster.

Parents, sometimes with large families, struggled to make a secure living, working long hours in dangerous environments, and must have seen school as a place of safety as well as hope for their children. Amongst those joining on the first day were:

- Margaret Jolly, six, and her three-year-old sister Alice. Their father William worked at a sawmill and Mum Alice was a cotton weaver. The family lived at 91 Windermere Road with six children all under the age of twelve.
- Nine-year-old Anne Salisbury and her brother John, five, moved from the National School in High Street to join Christ Church, where they were joined by their little brother Richard, only two. Their Father, an Attendant at the Asylum on Quernmore Road, and Mum, a laundress, had five children to look after in their cottage at Golgotha.
- Maggie Willock lived at 4 Ullswater Road, and at five years old was in the youngest of three generations in her house, her father and grandfather both working as upholsterers. Her three-year-old sister Mary joined Christ Church the following week.

Other families at the school included workers in quarries, on farms, a joiner, house painter, a wine, yeast and hops agent, the porter and tailor at the workhouse, and the landlord and landlady of the Britannia Inn. The school was a vital foundation for the new community emerging around Christ Church, cultivating a climate of mutual respect and understanding as well as aspiration amongst children of varied backgrounds, often in new homes.

The 1870s was a time of struggle for many, but also of optimism and change. As well as expanding educational opportunity, the first slum clearances were starting, some working men (and in School Board elections women) had been granted the vote, and trade unions were developing. Christ Church had the demanding task of meeting both immediate needs and rising future expectations for the children in its community.



Christ Church pupils at the church in the 1890s

1875-1914

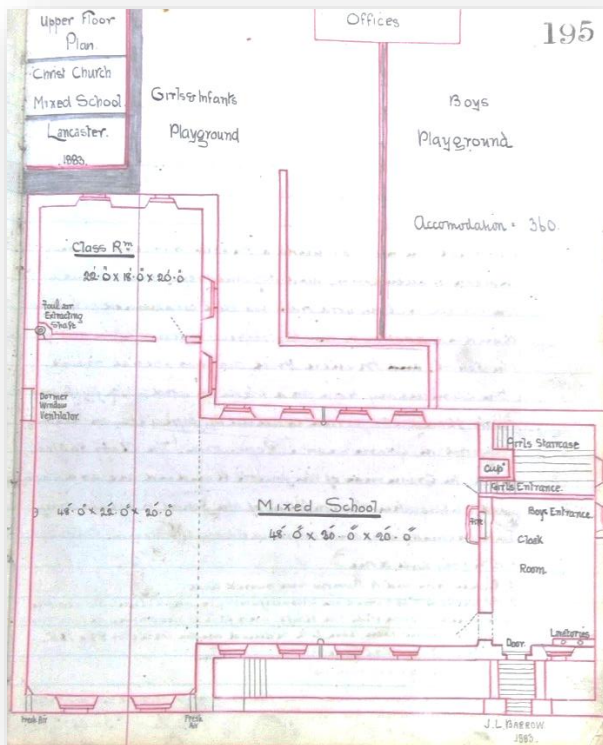
Between its foundation and the First World War, Christ Church School grew and developed dramatically, reflecting the community around it, changing national expectations, and the determination of its staff.

For its first few years, Christ Church had the dual challenge of growing recruitment and changing leadership, with no fewer than four Head Teachers serving in seven years. The school was opened by Agnes Gardner, who resigned after only five months to be replaced by Elizabeth Caley. She in turn handed over to Clara Winter after two years, and in 1882 Ann Willan took over briefly before an enlargement of the school coincided with a stabilisation of leadership.

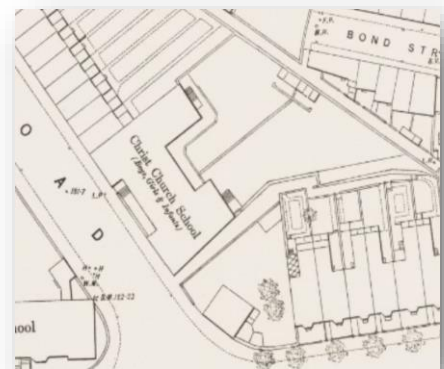
The local population continued to grow around the turn of the century. The opening of Williamson Park in 1881 created an attractive space overlooking Lancaster ripe for the development of housing, and the streets behind Christ Church on the former Moorlands and Primrose estates were mostly complete by 1900. The roads between Bath Street and Bath Mill Lane appeared in the 1880s, as well as four roads around Ridge Street and Caton Road.

Changes in school organisation were prompted by this challenge: in 1878 the Infants department was made separate from the older classes, and in 1882 junior age boys were admitted for the first time. An Education Act of 1891 prohibited the charging of Elementary School fees, but some pressure was relieved Christ Church after 1893, when Lancaster School Board started to build its own schools, eventually opening five by 1914. In 1902 all state schools came under the purview of new Local

Education Authorities with a responsibility to regulate standards and provide funding. This provided security but at the cost of independence: in December 1901, Head Master J.L. Barrow had an urgent meeting with the Vicar following “significant paragraphs” in the *Lancashire Evening Post* and *The London Times* reporting that the government grant to Christ Church would be withheld “if the premises are not made satisfactory before June 30th 1903.”



Head Master J.L. Barrow’s plan of Christ Church in 1883 (left), drawn shortly after joining the school reflects his concern about space, as the number on roll already exceeded accommodation. Below is a detail of the school from the Ordnance Survey map prepared in 1890.



There was certainly pressure on the school’s resources. Numbers in the school roll rose from a hundred in 1875 to nearly 400 a decade later, and in 1902 reached a peak of 559 in a school reckoned even on the restricted expectations of Victorian times to accommodate no more than 360. Numbers on roll and in attendance could fluctuate dramatically as working-class families moved house more regularly than today, and children stayed away because of everything from periodic bouts of ‘flu or measles to paid work or – in one instance – a circus visiting town. Nonetheless, average attendance usually reached 90 per cent, and classes commonly had fifty or more children in them. After its public warning in 1901, Christ Church regretfully had to be selective with applicants: in October 1903 the Head readmitted Mary Davidson, a girl who had had a leg amputated “under exceptional circumstances under Director’s order” and “with Manager’s consent”; in April 1911 the teacher in charge of Infants regretted that “several new children had to be refused because there are 55 children in Class II and 55 children in Class III.” By 1906 Christ Church’s roll was below its accommodation limit, and stayed there until 1914.

ABSENTEE AND LATE-COMER'S FORM.

If you wish your Children to make progress send them to School everyday

.....191

Name.....

Address

is late or absent from School this Morning and Afternoon.

You will oblige by stating in writing below the cause of this.

This absence notification of the 1910s shows full attendance has always been a priority for schools

The Head Master in charge for most of this period personified Victorian ambition and resilience. Born in 1857, John Barrow was a true son and servant of Christ Church parish. Raised in Rydal Road, he was a choirboy and later Warden of the church, where he was also married. After studying at the National School for Boys (now Ripley St Thomas School) he spent five years as a pupil teacher there before qualifying, and had briefer headships in Keswick and Forton before taking over at Christ Church in 1882, where he remained until his retirement in 1922.

Barrow not only steered the school through growth and organisational change: he maintained an atmosphere of high expectations and sought the widest opportunities for the school's pupils. During his time, 8,000 pupils passed through the school, of whom no fewer than twenty-nine became head teachers themselves, many in Lancaster schools. Spurred on by his motto "Never say you've done your best until you've tried again", fifty won County, Corporation or other prestigious scholarships to secondary schools, whilst over a dozen won prizes from the Diocese. Inspections of the school were consistently positive, and in 1899 it celebrated having been declared 'Excellent' in all of the five years since new government regulations were introduced.



An outing to Silverdale for the Christ Church boys in the 1890s

Barrow maintained these ambitions for his pupils as demands on schools evolved: the school leaving age rose from ten to fourteen under his leadership; when in 1906 an Assistant Master threatened to defy the Lancaster Director of Education's new rule that only the Head could give corporal punishment, Barrow "warned him of the consequences"; and Barrow's Log Books include press clippings about debates over specialisation in the curriculum and the best ways of improving pupils' prospects. In this reflective entry of 1900, he gave his response to a dilemma which still faces teachers today, and in which he gave priority to moral values:

The first aim of a schoolmaster should be the formation of character. It is far more important to teach at school the beauty of truth, justice, kindness and self-sacrifice than to aim solely at proficiency in arithmetic, geography and writing, and to send a boy into the world who would in time establish a name of high character and thorough trustworthiness is worth a great deal more than the gaining of a reputation for mere book knowledge. (J.L. Barrow, 'The Aims of a Schoolmaster')

This was achieved partly by day trips to local beauty spots such as Silverdale, or camping with the newly-formed Scouting movement, but more regularly debates were held amongst the older pupils, sometimes on topical and controversial issues including women's and workers' rights. An Inspector reported in April 1914 that in these "the children spoke with considerable ease and freedom. In the lower classes also the children have gained the power to speak freely." "The Head Master and his staff", the report went on, "work with much zeal. The results obtained are creditable to all concerned." As Christ Church approached its fortieth anniversary, there must have been a strong sense of achievement and hope amongst those who had seen the school meet the challenges of the preceding years. A still greater and more unexpected challenge was, however, imminent.



A group of older pupils outside at Moor Gate in 1900

1914-45

The First World War broke out during the summer holiday of 1914, and its ultimate impact was not anticipated by most of either the public or the government. At first, the routine of school was unaffected by events on the continent, and it was not until a month after Britain had declared war on Germany that Head John Barrow noted in his Log Book with a tone of surprise that “the extraordinary wave of patriotism which has seized the town has to a certain extent rather upset the work in school.” By the end of October a debate amongst the older boys ended in a vote 55-13 against the likelihood of a German invasion, and in November a list of Old Boys of Christ Church serving in the army appeared in the local press for the first time. Later school debates considered whether aircraft or torpedoes were more vital to the war effort, the introduction of rationing, and whether national games should be played during wartime. In December the school started its own Roll of Honour for former pupils and teachers of Christ Church serving in the armed forces.



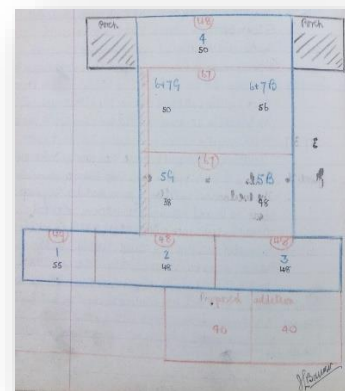
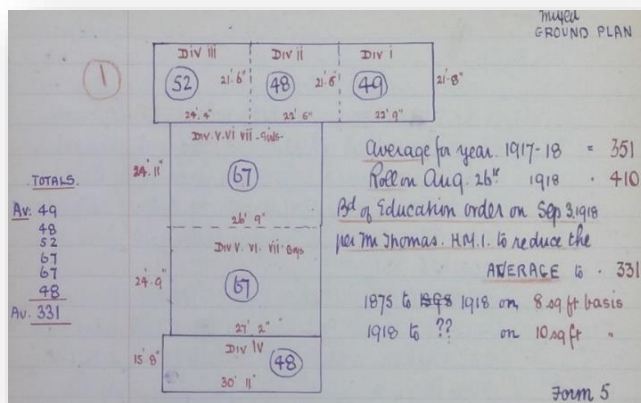
Drummer D.M. Bratherton of Park Road was one of at least twenty-nine Christ Church alumni who gave their lives in World War One. A talented violinist who sang in the school choir, he was training to follow his father into work at Moor Lane Mills, but was killed in action in France in July 1916 aged 21.

In all, 339 pupils and ten teachers who had been at Christ Church joined the Roll of Honour by the end of the war. Two current teachers, Harold Chapman and Mr Keen, volunteered as soon as the war began: Chapman was wounded at Ypres in 1915, and again in Northern France two years later. He and former pupils visited school on leave to report to children about the campaign. Another, Mr Todd, refused to sign up even after conscription was introduced in 1916, but the Head noted that he was “marched off to barracks” and left town with a detachment within the week. One former pupil, Sergeant-Major W. Bell, was awarded a Distinguished Conduct Medal for conspicuous and consistent gallantry in taking command of his company when all its officers had become casualties during an attack on enemy trenches in August 1916. The following month he earned the Military Medal. The range of regiments represented on the Roll of Honour to the diversity of destinations to which Christ Church pupils had gone: most served in the Royal Lancaster Regiment, but others joined forces from 18 other counties and districts of the British Isles, as well as Australian, Canadian and South African regiments. Tragically, at least twenty-nine former Christ Church pupils gave their lives in the war, whilst two more were taken prisoner, one of whom wrote to the Head from Goettingen prison camp pleading for bread and cocoa to be sent to him.

In school itself, existing rituals such as drill practice in the yard, saluting the flag and celebrating Empire Day took on a new significance, and ‘patriotic songs’ were sung at school services in church. The most direct impact of war on Christ Church came with an explosion at the munitions factory at White Lund on 1st October 1917. The blast knocked out the school’s window panes and was heard as far away as Burnley. The threat of warfare to civilians was unknown before 1914, and the Head noted that thousands of locals had slept out all night, children were in shock and that it took several days for their confidence to recover enough to return to school.

As the war faced its unpredictable later stages, the Head remarked in April 1918 that “the critical state of affairs as regards the British Army in Flanders seems to have had its adverse effects on both teachers and taught”, and he addressed this with a lesson on ‘British pluck and heroism’ illustrated by that week’s Naval raid on Ostend and Zeebrugge. Finally in July the school closed for a week owing to the Spanish influenza epidemic which had spread in the trail of the conflict, and in total took more lives than the war itself. The next closure for a week came happily however, after Assembly on 11 November, marking the news of the Armistice.

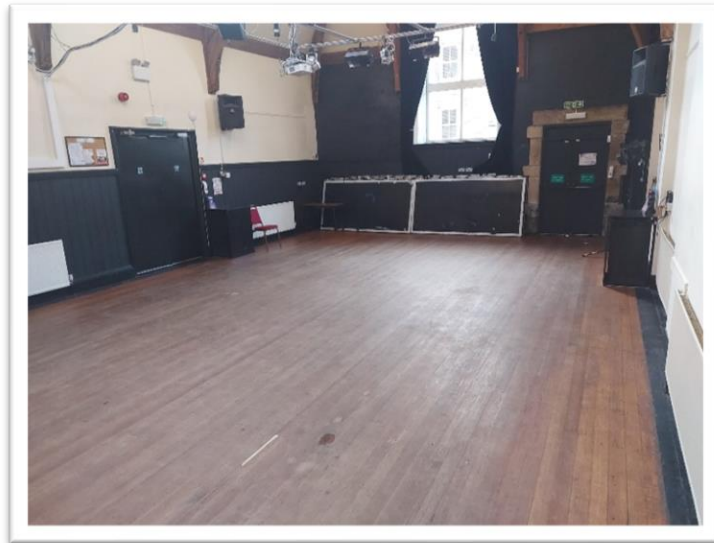
Head Master John Barrow wrote in 1900 that “the problem of 1875 – that of accommodation – remains the problem in the Jubilee year of the school”: amongst many “minor alterations” – the eastern end of the school had been remodelled to create a new classroom in 1887, a corridor, offices and heating were added, and the playground asphalted, but there had been, he noted, “no extensions.” This target was met after the war owing to even greater necessity but only at length.



Plans drawn up by Head John Barrow in 1918 and 1919 show Christ Church was full to capacity, and that he planned to move in next door to solve the problem

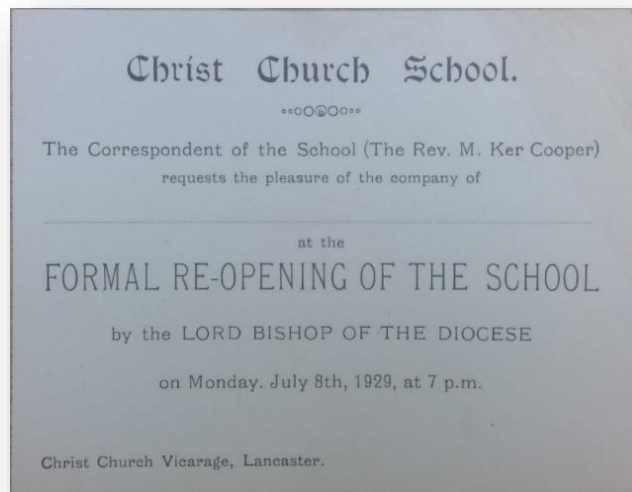
Following the war, the government’s reconstruction programme promised greater quantity and quality of education. The school leaving age was raised from 12 to 14, and schools like Christ Church were expected to increase the space available to each child from 8 square feet to ten. The system of ‘half-timers’ – children who worked, often in mills, part-time as well as being in school – finally came to an end as well. This brought Christ Church’s accommodation problem to a head, and the Borough Education Committee passed a resolution in October 1918 that “except with the special permission of the Committee, no further children be admitted to the Christ Church Mixed School until further notice in order that the average attendance be reduced to not more than 331.”

Consent was sought from the authorities in 1919 to use the Gregson Institute’s Bartlett Hall, opened in Williamson Road two years before the war, as temporary accommodation for fifty Infants and 55 older girls “for some months until proposed alterations are completed.” It was hoped to expand the school replacing two adjoining cottages with newly-built teaching space for eighty children.



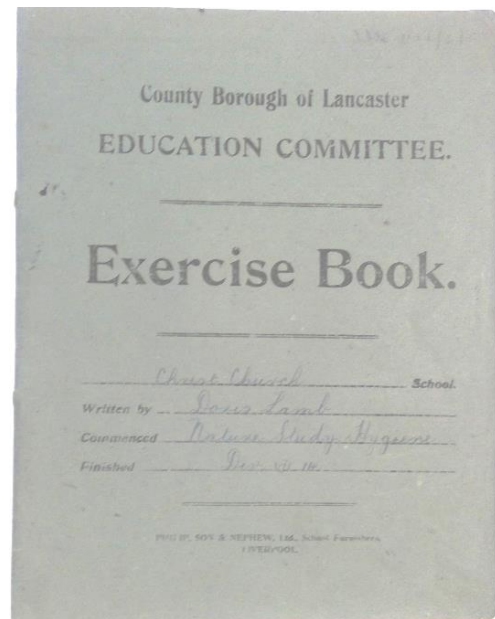
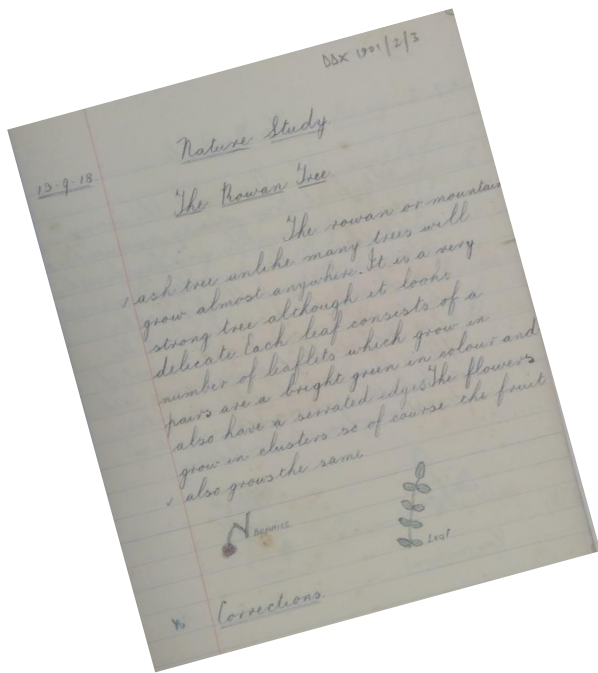
The Bartlett Hall at the Gregson Institute, which was used by Christ Church School from 1919 to 1968 as a classroom, performance space and for school dinners

In fact, it was agreed initially that Bartlett Hall could be used for four years, but the sum of £6,000 (the equivalent of over £300,000 today) had to be raised to pay for this modernisation, and it was not until 1927 that permission was granted by the Board of Education in Whitehall for, in total, “accommodation for 400 Junior Mixed and Infants in eight classrooms of 50 each.” Eventually the school was reopened in its extended form two years later, and a decade after the plans had first been made. The Gregson Institute continued its association with the school as its only large-scale space for fundraising events and performances.



The entrance to the 1929 extension of the school building, and an invitation to the re-opening of the school with its new classrooms after a ten-year wait

An impression of the experience of children in the school after World War One can be gained not only from school records, but from the work of one of the pupils. The curriculum concentrated on ensuring that children had a grasp of reading, writing and arithmetic, supplemented by geography,



Harold Chapman, Christ Church Head Master 1922-47

The interwar period also saw a changing of the guard in Christ Church's leadership. If John Barrow was a son of the parish, Harold Chapman, who took over from him as Head Master in 1922, was of the school itself. Born in 1888 – the fifth of six children of Boilermaker John and his wife Eunice – he was raised on Borrowdale Road and attended Christ Church School before becoming a Pupil Teacher and Assistant Master there. Apart from his secondary education at the Royal Grammar School, a year's training in London and his war service, Chapman had spent fifty-four years at Christ Church, twenty-five as Head, when he retired in 1947.

The Second World War had a far more immediate impact upon on Christ Church school than the First. Though Lancaster was thankfully mostly spared air attacks, school operations were necessarily affected by the threat of bombardment or invasion. Even before the declaration of war, Lancaster schools including Christ Church were closed temporarily to operate as billeting centres for 400 children evacuated from Salford. Others came later from Barrow and London, and throughout the war evacuees were taught at Christ Church, requiring a 'double shift' system of teaching to accommodate the numbers. The school was also a rest centre for temporarily homeless civilians at times during the war. Christ Church's own children underwent gas mask inspections and practiced air raid evacuations to the park; blackout blinds were made for the windows, the staff room was converted into an air raid shelter, and sirens were tested regularly. Extra ration coupons were sourced to keep needlework classes going, put soap in the bathrooms, and provide for the children whose families were suffering the worst hardship.



Christ Church pupils in the Moor Gate yard in 1939

The City Engineer advised the school to economise on water use in 1942, and in 1944 the Minister of Fuel forbade the use of central heating in school. Christ Church supported wartime fundraising through the sale of National Savings certificates and appeals such as Warship Week in 1942, when pupils went to see an exhibition of British naval prowess at the Town Hall. Following the German attack on Holland and Belgium, the 1940 Whit Week holiday was cancelled, and attendance was affected after sustained air raid warnings in Lancaster during the Blitz through the night of 7th April 1941.



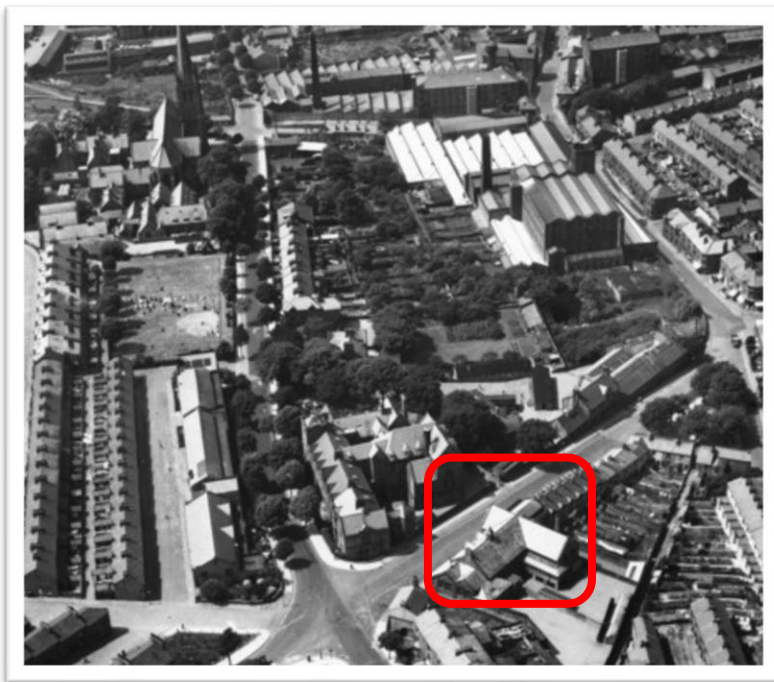
Children evacuated from Salford leaving Castle Station to be billeted at Christ Church and other Lancaster schools in September 1939

Although most school staff were exempt from conscription to active service, the Royal Infirmary wrote to the Head in June 1944 asking for volunteers to work there at weekends “in present military situation.” The Head himself had been serving with the Lancaster Home Guard, based at the Gregson Institute, for over three years (having sought special permission from the Director of Education to leave school premises at 4 o’clock on two days a week). When German surrender came, the Head was given a week’s warning of the likely date, and school closed on May 8th, VE Day, 9th and (for Ascension Day) 10th. His Log Book entry on May 11th reads simply: “Resumed normal school work.”



The show must go on: despite the constraints of war, Christ Church school pupils were amongst this team from Christ Church Youth Fellowship won the Certificate of Merit at the Lancaster Youth Drama Festival in 1944

1945-92



Christ Church School, Moor Gate, in 1951 (in red) amidst Lancaster’s industrial townscape

The end of the Second World War opened another new era for English schools. The 1944 Education Act raised the school leaving age to fifteen, and promised free secondary education to all children. This meant that Christ Church lost its classes over eleven years old, but this was soon compensated for by the rising birth rate in the post-war ‘baby boom’, and the rapid expansion of housing on the Newton and Ridge estates.

The Bartlett Hall at the Gregson Institute was pressed into service again – this time as a dining room, where a hundred children at a time were served from newly-installed kitchens meeting

upgraded specifications for schools. a government Inspector who observed proceedings there in 1952 observed characteristically dryly that “both meals and service are satisfactory”, and some still

remember rituals and formalities such as the collective saying of this Grace before eating delicacies such as prune dessert:

We thank Thee for the world so sweet,
We thank Thee for the food we eat,
We thank Thee for the birds that sing,
We thank Thee, Lord, for everything.
Amen.

1947 saw the appointment of a new Head Master in Richard Jennings. Formerly a teacher at Ripley St Thomas School, Mr Jennings was a founder in 1948 of the Lancaster Primary Schools' Music Festival, of which he became Secretary, conducting its annual concert for the last four years of his Headship until 1957, and seeing the function become the largest of its kind in Lancashire. The tradition of other character-building extra-curricular activities was resumed at Christ Church after the War, with children taking trips in 1958 to Edinburgh Zoo and on a visit to London. School papers of the post-war period show regular success for Christ Church entrants in local competitions for everything from sport to music and gardening. Pupils and staff – including the Head – celebrated Christ Church's centenary in 1975 by immersing themselves in a recreated the Victorian school environment – complete with dress, equipment and transport.



Christ Church pupils in 1948 recognised by the Mayor as finalists in the E.G. Smith football cup (above left), and winners of the *Lancaster Guardian's* Rounders trophy (left) and a decade later enjoying a trip to London to see Tower Bridge and the Palace of Westminster (above right)

With pupil numbers at 350 and climbing, another new classroom was carved out of the premises at Moor Gate; but expectations of the quality of the school environment were also rising, and it was becoming clear by the time that Mr Jennings moved on that a more fundamental solution to what John Barrow had called "the problem of 1875" – overcrowding – would have to be found.



Christ Church pupils at study and prayer on Moor Gate in the 1950s

It fell to new Head Teacher Donald Taylor to find that solution. In April 1960 the Friends of Christ Church School group was formed with the aim of raising funds to buy a plot of land on Highfield where a new school building could be started, and in January 1961 the plot was dedicated by the Bishops of Blackburn and Lancaster in the company of the Mayor and Mayoress of the City and the County's Chief Education Officer. After the half-term break, pupils returned to Moor Gate on 22 February to be marched up the hill after assembly to see the first two classrooms on what is now the main school site. One of these was used as overflow space for older children, the other for Infant pupils arriving from the Ridge. The Mayor reflected the confident mood of the time and the high regard in which Christ Church was held, saying:

The site and location are excellent, and we look forward to the time when the building will be completed, and the school will be able to carry on with its firm traditions, maintaining the excellent progress which has been apparent throughout its history.



Surprise news for the older children of Christ Church as they see their new classrooms at Highfield in February 1961

The wait for completion of the site was even more painfully long than that for the extension in the 1920s. Delays in the first phase prompted the *Lancaster Guardian* to urge in an editorial that “meeting the educational needs of children on our housing estates is a big problem, and one that demands the utmost co-operation from all the authorities concerned.” Fundraising to pay the £1,000 debt generated by the first phase continued after its opening – a bazaar at the Town Hall at which the Mothers’ Union sold 750 cups of tea raised £430 in October 1961. The Highfield building was initially referred to as an ‘annexe’ or ‘the extension’, and was planned to prepare Infants for entry to St Anne’s as well as Christ Church School.



Donald Taylor, Head Master from 1957 to 1979, responsible for overseeing Christ Church’s departure from the Gregson Institute, and opening its first new classes at Highfield.

With no main hall at Moor Gate or Highfield, the Gregson Institute remained in use through the 1960s, and from then until the 1980s May Queens and Parent Governors were chosen for both sites. Despite almost annual applications to the Department of Education, it was not until 1989 that approval for completion of the Highfield site was received, and after lengthy negotiations over design, the first earth was dug by Chair of Governors Syd Woodhouse in February 1992 for four classrooms with a resources space and a cloakroom. Unsurprisingly, Mr Woodhouse recorded in the next Parish Magazine the frustration of the Governors, staff and parents of Christ Church School.



A music concert staged by Christ Church School children at the Bartlett Hall in 1964

Most of the cost of the development - £316,000 – was met by the Department, and the remainder was granted by the Ripley Educational Trust. The additional funding for a £12,000 Special Needs facility was raised partly by a sponsored parachute jump by the Vicar, Father Peter. In Summer 1992

the Victorian building at Moor Gate closed for teaching for the last time, and its last 120 pupils and staff transferred to Highfield. The long wait to solve ‘the problem of 1875’ was over.



A sample of prizes won by Christ Church teams at everything from football, rounders and skittleball to singing and bulb-growing in the 1960s and 1970s. Below the pupils recreate the experience of Victorian work and play for Christ Church’s Centenary Celebrations in 1975



1992-2025

In the last generation, Christ Church has faced some fresh challenges distinctive to modern life, and it has met them showing the resilience and purpose which have characterised the school throughout its history.

Firstly, 1992 saw the full implementation of a comprehensive new framework for the running of English schools which had a significant impact on Christ Church: the school's leaders took more responsibility for its finance and organisation from the Local Education Authority, but had to comply with the new National Curriculum, to prepare children for national tests, their performance in which placed the school in competitive league tables, and to be inspected by OFSTED, whose reports were made public. In the latter, as in Victorian times, Christ Church was consistently recognised in every respect at each inspection as 'Good' or better.

Ruth takes over reins at Christ Church

New Head Teacher at Christ Church School, Lancaster Ruth Thompson.

MRS Ruth Thompson has been appointed as the new head teacher at Christ Church Primary School, Lancaster.

She had previously been working as a deputy head at Droughington Church of England School near Preston.

She said she was delighted to take up her new job – at her fourth school in Lancashire.

“My intention was to become a head of a church school at the heart of the community. I wanted a school which serves the parish and wider community. My plan is to develop community links.”

She took over from acting head Sandra Hall who has now been appointed deputy at the school in Derwent Road.

The *Lancaster Guardian* reports the appointment of Ruth Thompson, Christ Church's first female Head in 117 years (24 September 1999)

The leadership of Christ Church dealing with these challenges represented a resonance with the school's early days in a different way with – for the first time since 1882 – a female permanent Head Teacher when Ruth Thompson took up the post in 1999. Echoing the priorities of all her predecessors, Mrs Thompson told the local press:

“My intention was to become the Head of a Church school at the heart of the local community. I wanted a school which serves the parish and the wider community. My plan is to develop community links.”

Since then, as in the first seven years of the school (though over a rather longer quarter-century) four women have served as Head Teachers of Christ Church: Mrs Thompson's Deputy Sandra Hall, Elizabeth Gardner, Lesley Brookbanks and today Miss Simpson.

With a falling birth rate, expanding premises and from 1997 clearer limits on class sizes than earlier in the century – and despite the construction of over a hundred new homes above the school at the Nightingale Hall site in the last ten years – the focus of progress in the school has been quality of experience more than, as in the past, quantity of space. A particularly novel aspect of this has been the relentless, rapid development of digital learning. In this as other matters Christ Church called upon its historic strength of community support: as early as 2000, the school’s summer fete – complete with bouncy castle, tombola and the Lune Valley Jazz Band – was devoted to raising £1,500 for a computer room. To this was added the proceeds of a sponsored cycle ride from St George’s Quay to Glasson Dock and back by dozens of pupils, parents and staff. The result was that an OFSTED inspection of 2005 could note the new IT suite and computer club, that technology was embedded in children’s and teachers’ work, and that “children use the interactive whiteboard, computers and other equipment, such as digital cameras and listening centres confidently” and noted their “capacity to keep concentrating by themselves, for example when using computers, is often above that expected for their ages.”



Pedal power: Christ Church families and staff on a sponsored cycle ride between St George’s Quay and Glasson Dock to raise funds for Christ Church’s computer facilities in July 2000. The youngest rider was only four!

Later enhancements of the school’s environment included the raising of protective fencing around the site, the levelling of the sports field, and most recently the development of the school’s facilities with further extension in 2024. In 2022, the school was awarded a £750,000 decarbonisation grant from the government via the Diocese to support reduction of the school’s carbon footprint through more efficient heating and insulation.



The Bishop of Lancaster celebrated the ‘Bishop’s Challenge’ Bible interpretation project in 2017, and the Deputy Mayor saw the burying of a time capsule at Miss Whalley’s Fields in 2019

Sporting success continued as Christ Church football team won the Lancaster Schools’ Cup in 2001 and the following year the school hosted a ‘Football Fiesta’. School teams and clubs enjoy the full range of activity including cricket, rugby, netball, athletics and dance, and have in recent years won

local tournaments in orienteering and bowling. Thirty years before England's victorious Lionesses demanded the equal access of boys and girls to their sport, Christ Church's football was mixed. The girls' team has now held the Lancaster & Heysham Sports Network title for Futsal for two years, and as 2024 Lancaster Champions in the outdoor game will this year take part in Lancashire Girls' County Primary School tournament, and have been invited to represent Morecambe FC at the Primary Stars Under-11s Girls' Football Tournament

Just as previous generations of staff, children and families at Christ Church had to endure the constraints of war, the current one was faced with the shock of the Covid pandemic with the changing demands of two national lockdowns called at short notice. Christ Church served a community with more than the average share of key workers in health, social care and business, so the school continued to teach half of its pupils on site at any given time, including three-quarters of the roll in all. For the remainder, staff delivered work to families by hand until funding came through to ensure children had access to online teaching. Full attendance was monitored, and three staff were devoted to constant availability for advice and support by phone. Other community support provided by the school, such as delivering food parcels to vulnerable families, set a model which has been continued in activities since the end of the pandemic.

The most striking continuity across Christ Church School's history is its mission to build both individual character and local community through a century and a half of hardship, war and social change. John Barrow, the Victorian Head who focussed on character and started pupil debates, would have been heartened to hear OFSTED report in 2012 that "pupils are highly confident and want to achieve well. They respond extremely well to the many opportunities provided for them to take on school responsibilities." Inspectors reiterate at every visit the importance to the quality of life at Christ Church its links with the Church and charitable activity, its sports teams and choir, pupils' trips to museums and galleries, and the visits of local politicians to the School Council to witness democracy at work. Their most recent report simply opened with the observation that:

Pupils enjoy attending school. They arrive each day ready to begin their learning. Pupils get along with one another. In lessons, they respect each other's views and live up to the high expectations that leaders have of them.

The founders of Christ Church School would be proud of its legacy and its prospects.

Timeline

1870	Education Act establishes School Boards
1875	Opening of school at Moor Gate for girls and infant boys
1882	Junior boys admitted and J.L. Barrow becomes Head Master
1891	Fees for state elementary schools ended
1914-18	First World War
1918	School leaving age rises to 14; Bartlett Hall used for classes
1929	Extension opened at Moor Gate
1939-45	Second World War
1945	Primary school ends at 11; Bartlett Hall used for dining
1957	Centenary of Christ Church chapel celebrated by school
1961	First pupils move to Highfield
1975	School celebrates centenary
1988	Education Act sets up National Curriculum and SATs
1992	New classrooms at Highfield; last pupils leave Moor Gate
2005	First school computer room in use
2020-21	Coronavirus pandemic
2024	School buildings extended

Dr Matt Cole is an Associate Lecturer in History at Lancaster University.

