

Robert Raikes

Robert Raikes was an amazing man who still has an impact today. He was born on 14 September 1736, and baptised ten days later in St Mary de Crypt.

Robert Raikes is best known for the foundation of the global Sunday School movement. He was passionate about prison reform, realising that unless children were educated, they too would end up as criminals in the future.

The story is told that one day Raikes was in St Catherine's Street in Gloucester and saw lots of ragged children playing in the street. He heard that on Sundays the street was full of children running riot with nothing to do. Most of them were employed in Gloucester's pin factories on the other six days of the week.

The Sunday School movement began in July 1780 in the home of a Mrs Meredith. To begin with only boys attended, and she heard the lessons of the older boys who coached the younger ones. Later, girls were also allowed to attend. It was for children aged five to fourteen.

The Raikes family were journalists and Raikes became proprietor of the Gloucester Journal in 1757. He used the newspaper to publicise the schools and bore most of the cost in the early years.

Their textbook was the Bible, and they were taught by lay people. The original schedule for the schools, as written by Raikes, was "The children were to come after ten in the morning, and stay till twelve; they were then to go home and return at one; and after reading a lesson, they were to be conducted to Church. After Church, they were to be employed in repeating the catechism till after five, and then dismissed, with an injunction to go home without making a noise". Children learnt to read and to write as well as being taught about God and the Christian faith.

By 1786 about 200 000 children were going to Sunday Schools all over the country and by 1831, this had grown to 1.25 million children, or about 25% of the population. Raikes had connections in the USA and he was instrumental in setting up a Sunday School in Virginia. As these schools preceded the first state funding of schools for the general public, they are seen as the forerunners of the current English school system.

Raikes married Anne Trigge in 1767 and they had ten children. He lived for many years in the half-timbered building opposite St Mary de Crypt which is now a pub called the Robert Raikes.

When Robert Raikes died in 1811 the children from his Sunday School who attended the funeral service were each given a shilling and plum cake. In St Mary de Crypt there is a special chapel called the Raikes Chapel containing the Raikes family vault.