

Local schools in the seventeenth century

The gentry were favoured with comparatively easy access to schooling and most appeared to have had a healthy regard for education. Usually their sons were packed off to school at a comparatively early age, at around six or seven years. William Lilly, the astrologer who started life as the son of a Leicestershire yeoman and later attended the grammar school at Ashby, recalls that he was 'put to learn at such schools and of such masters as the rudeness of the place and country afforded'. Rude as it may have been his schooling nonetheless stood him in good stead. The late Tudor and early Stuart grammar schools were stepping stones to centres of higher learning. Their success is best measured, perhaps, by a survey by A.L. Hughes of 288 Warwickshire gentry families which shows that ninety-two per cent had sons enrolled in the universities or inns of court by 1640. The increase in schooling was part of a great wave of educational enthusiasm that swept across the midlands in this period. Diocesan subscription books provide lists of the schoolmasters who complied with an enactment of 1562 that required them to subscribe to the Church of England's thirty nine articles. The ecclesiastical subscription books from Lichfield show that at least half the parishes in that diocese, including Austrey, were served by licensed schoolmasters between 1584 and 1642.

The Austrey villagers did not have to send their sons far to learn to read and write: they were within walking distance of George Atrobus' famous grammar school at Tamworth, reputedly founded in the time of Edward III and endowed by Elizabeth I in 1558. They also had the choice of a string of grammar schools founded and endowed by the third earl of Huntingdon (in particular, the schools at Leicester, Hinckley and Ashby), as well as the grammar school at Appleby and Market Bosworth, so they could afford to be selective. The Appleby School charter records that the school took boys from Appleby, Norton, Austrey, Newton, Stretton, Measham, Snarestone and Chilcote as well as 'paupers' from Norton in the early 1700s.

Schooling was not the exclusive preserve of the gentry. Puritan clergy took the initiative in setting up vernacular schools for the children of the poorer husbandmen and labourers, regarding literacy as a weapon against the perceived evils of ignorance and idleness. Judging from the number of licensed schoolmasters in the county in the first half of the seventeenth century, the clergy were particularly active. Often the vicar or his curate taught elementary grammar to the sons of his parishioners in the village church, as for example at Orton, where in 1638 the vicar had a licence 'to teach English to children'. The earliest indication of a school in Austrey is an entry in the parish register in 1581 describing John Bentley as a 'schoolmaster'. The bishop of Lichfield's visitations of 1616 and 1662 confirm the existence of a non-endowed vernacular school in the parish which probably charged around 2d a week to take 'petties' or junior school boys.