

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLING AND THE WORKING CLASSES 1860–1918

J. S. Hurt

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Volume 8

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J. S. HURT

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1979 by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd

This edition first published in 2017

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-138-22412-4 (Set)

ISBN: 978-1-315-40302-1 (Set) (ebk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-21641-9 (Volume 8) (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-44228-0 (Volume 8) (ebk)

Publisher's Note

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LONDON: Routledge & Kegan Paul

*First published in 1979 in Great Britain
by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd
and in Canada and the United
States of America by
University of Toronto Press
Toronto and Buffalo
Set in 10/12pt Press Roman by
Hope Services, Abingdon, Oxon.
and printed in Great Britain by
Lowe & Brydone Ltd
Thetford, Norfolk
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Hurt, John

*Elementary schooling and the working classes,
1860-1918. — (Studies in social history).*

- 1. Education, Elementary — English — History*
- 2. Labour and Labouring classes — Education —
England — History*

I. Title II. Series

371.9'67 LA633 79-40050

RKP ISBN 0 7100 0275 0

UTP ISBN 0 8020 2353 3

To Grenda



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Preface

In common with many readers of this book my family's educational background is rooted in the period that it describes. My grandfather and grandmother attended Church schools in the St Marylebone area of London when the Reverend C. D. Du Port (p.9) was supervising them. They had eleven children, the eldest two of whom attended a private school next door to their home, a school now destroyed without trace thanks to a preliminary onslaught of the *Luftwaffe* and a follow-up attack by property speculators. The middle range of children attended a Church school until my grandparents, convinced of its insanitary condition and ignoring the entreaties of its clerical manager, gave their support to the secular arm. Thus the youngest children, including my father, attended the Princess Road Board School, Marylebone; fortunately, this was after the consequences of E. R. Robson's negligent supervision had been made good and the drains repaired (p.170). Coming from a family that respected learning and enjoyed modest prosperity, the younger children earned books and medals for their diligence, punctuality, regularity of attendance and, in one case, for a faithful reproduction of a lecture on temperance. At least two of the children went to higher-grade schools, one to train as an elementary-school teacher just in time to receive one of the first compulsory courses in health and hygiene (p.171). Thus their experiences at a school in a 'non-necessitous' area were not those of many of the children described in these pages.

However, there was one classmate of my father's who was frequently caned for arriving late at school until the schoolmaster learned the reason: this boy had had to wait at home until his mother had earned some money by charring and could buy him his breakfast (p.108). When

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my father's master found this out, he gave the boy a halfpenny or penny to buy some food in the mornings. Readers will see that I have been aware of these family stories and my own affinity with the past while writing this book and I expect some of my readers will have their childhood memories of parental anecdotes similarly revived.

I have finally the pleasant task of thanking all those who have made this work possible. My thanks are due to Professor Harold Perkin and Dr Eric Evans of Lancaster University for their encouragement, advice, and meticulous editing of the text. I also wish to place on record my gratitude to Ms Pamela Mumford for the calculations that appear in the appendix to Chapter V. I have also to thank the University of Birmingham for financial assistance and study leave that have facilitated the necessary research and writing. I acknowledge permission from the Reverend C. Buckmaster, principal of St Peter's College, Birmingham, to quote from his college's archives; from the Greater London Council to quote from their archives; and from the British Library to reproduce material from the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*. My thanks are also due to Joan Maddocks for typing much of the final draft. Last, my greatest debt is to my wife, Grenda, whose encouragement, support, and scholarly advice have proved invaluable.

Part One

The Working Classes and the 1870 Act



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I

Our Future Masters

The Elementary Education Act of 1870 created school boards for those parts of England and Wales in which there were insufficient school places for those children whose station in life was held to destine them for the elementary school. These boards possessed power to enforce the attendance of their pupils. Ten years later this power became a duty that devolved also on the school attendance committee, a body created under an act of 1876 in the non-school-board areas. As certain groups of children had been forced to attend school before 1870, the idea of compulsory education was not new. The number previously affected by a miscellany of legislation that included the Factory Acts, the Reformatory and Industrial Schools Acts and the Poor Law Acts, had been comparatively small. What was new about the legislation of the 1870s was the extent of its operation. For the first time in history the nation's children had to attend school on a full-time basis for a minimum of five years, a period that extended to nine for many by 1914.

The new laws had an important effect on the working-class way of life. No longer could parents take for granted the services of their children in the home and their contributions to the family budget. Traditional working-class patterns of behaviour, when continued, did so in defiance of the law. The state had interfered with the pattern of family life by coming between parent and child, reducing family income, and imposing new patterns of behaviour on both parent and child.

Any analysis of the impact of compulsory education between 1870 and 1914 on working-class culture has to recognize the great diversity of practice and belief that this term conceals. In reality there were several working classes and many cultural differences in the period

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under examination. Mid-Victorians were well aware of the complexity of this cultural mosaic as their frequent preference for the term 'working classes', in contrast to 'working class', demonstrates. As well as giving recognition to gradations within the working classes based on differences of income, occupation, and the degree of reliability of earnings, they were also aware of regional diversity.

The *modus operandi* of the commissioners appointed under the chairmanship of the Duke of Newcastle in 1858 to inquire into the state of popular education in England—a brief that was extended without protest in those pre-devolutionary days to include Wales—illustrates this point. In tackling the problem of producing a balanced account of the existing state of affairs without the advantage of today's knowledge of statistically reliable sampling techniques, they chose two contrasting agricultural regions, two manufacturing, two mining, two maritime, and two areas in London for detailed examination. Yet, as will be argued, their omission of many of the largest cities and some of the poorest parts of London obscured the major failing of the elementary schools of the day. The children of the poorest classes—the 'residuum', the 'street arabs', the 'dangerous and perishing classes', to quote a few contemporary terms—were virtually untouched by the existing state-aided voluntary schools managed by the religious societies. The most important of these were the Anglican National Society and the nonconformist British and Foreign School Society which between them provided over 90 per cent of the voluntary-school places.

If, broadly speaking, the children of the poorest received no education apart from that offered in those unflatteringly designated institutions, the Ragged Schools that flourished mainly in Bristol and London, it follows that the new laws bore the most heavily on the least articulate. Hence any evaluation of the impact of compulsory education in the period under examination is heavily dependent on the writings of their social superiors, be they middle-class observers or the leaders of the trade-union and labour movement. To stipulate a further caveat, the term compulsory education is used as a synonym for compulsory schooling. Although this is not entirely accurate it accords with contemporary and popular usage. It must not be forgotten, though, that for the greater part of historical time children have received their education outside the classroom. Schooling has been the experience of the minority of mankind before the present century. Such phrases as 'got his book-learning' or 'got his schooling' vividly demonstrate the

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way in which the distinction between formal and informal education lives on in the minds of the elderly.

Our discussion must start with an examination of the position in the 1860s just before the new laws reached the statute book. There are two interrelated problems. The first is that of defining the social groups for whom the elementary schools were intended. As the parental consumer had a free choice of sending his child to an elementary school, a private school, or to no school at all, the second problem is that of establishing whether the social composition of the classroom reflected the will of the bureaucrat.

As an answer to the first question the Education Department used a simple social and demographic equation. One-seventh of the population belonged to the upper and middle classes who were expected to make their own arrangements for the education of their children. As a corollary it was argued that these parents would not have wanted their children to attend a school in the company of those of the remaining six-sevenths. The latter, the labouring classes, came within the orbit of the state system. Although the methods by which these proportions were determined do not stand up to a close scrutiny, they provided a working basis for the implementation of the 1870 Act. When it became law, officials used this rule-of-thumb formula to determine whether a particular district possessed sufficient school accommodation. Since this was the first great nineteenth-century exercise in social planning the Departmental guide-lines merit closer scrutiny.

The ratios of one- and six-sevenths were derived from calculations made by Dr W. Farr, of the Registrar-General's Office, and others for the Taunton Commissioners' investigation of the middle-class endowed schools in the 1860s. Farr used the returns of the Department of Inland Revenue. These showed that 519,991 of the 3,739,505 houses in England and Wales were assessed for inhabited house duty at an annual value of £20 or more in the financial year, 1861–2. He calculated that the corresponding figures for 1864 were .575,779 and 3,893,233 respectively. He also found that the number of marriages by licence, at a fee of £3 4s, in 1864 was 26,579. On the other hand 153,808 couples had chosen the more economical and leisurely method of marriage by banns at a cost of about 12s. The proportions in the two cases, 14,789 and 14,730 to 100,000 were close enough to convince him that there was a causal connection and that they provided a satisfactory means for determining the number of children in the middle and upper classes. 'Taking the country generally', he pronounced, 'it is considered right

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and becoming for the higher and middle classes to marry by licence, and for the rest of the population to marry after the publication of banns.' He concluded that despite the difficulties involved in drawing the line between¹

what are called the working classes and the middle classes, requiring such an education as the Commission is inquiring into We have broad lines drawn by the people themselves, and recognized for practical purposes by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. From the one class he collects the house tax, and he does not now venture to go lower.

Other investigators, who followed different routes, reached similar conclusions. Although D. C. Richardson, Assistant Commissioner and Registrar to the Commission, quite legitimately attacked Farr's assumption, he broadly agreed with his result. Richardson showed that the relationship Farr had attempted to establish between social class, the occupation of houses assessed at £20 a year or more, and marriage by licence, did not stand up to close scrutiny. For instance, 44·2 per cent of the houses in London and 6·2 per cent in Westmorland were assessed at £20 a year or more. Yet the percentages of marriages by special licence in the two areas were 14 and 39 respectively. Richardson accordingly carried out a survey based on information derived from the *Court Directories*. He chose for investigation the towns of Woodbridge and Bury St Edmunds, in Suffolk, and the large villages of Kimbolton, Huntingdonshire, and Stradbroke, Suffolk, a sample biased heavily in favour of a rural and pre-industrial England of a century earlier. From an analysis of this material he decided that 155 in every 1,000 belonged to the upper and middle classes. A third person to tackle the problem was J. G. Fitch, another assistant commissioner to the Taunton Commission. After examining the parental background of children in the schools of York, Sheffield, Halifax, and Selby, he calculated that 17·8 per cent of the boys and 19·7 per cent of the girls belonged to the class that paid for the education of its children. His slightly higher proportions, he argued, were consistent with Farr's figures because they were inflated by the longer stay at school made by children in 'the middle and upper ranks'.²

A contemporary study, R. D. Baxter's *National Income* (1868), provides little further guidance on the matter. Baxter calculated that 4,870,000 of the estimated population of England and Wales belonged to the upper and middle classes. The balance, 16,130,000, were members of the manual labouring classes. However, Baxter's classification

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was based on an amalgamate of social esteem imputed to a particular occupation and status ascribed by income. He had used the Occupational Returns of the 1861 census to make his allocation of individuals to his broad social categories. Similarly, his general conclusion that there were 2,053,000 people with independent incomes in the upper and middle classes and 7,785,000 in the manual labouring class gives little further guidance in answering the question what proportion of the population could afford to pay school fees of over ninepence a week, the upper limit of the charge made in public elementary schools. Since Baxter was concerned with establishing the total number of independent incomes, his aggregate figures include estimates of the earnings of both married and single women, and children. Moreover, his estimates of upper- and middle-class income are made from the dubious evidence of income tax returns. Somewhat naively he assumed that only the working classes would have been so unscrupulous as to practise tax evasion.³ Thus Baxter's enquiry does no more than broadly confirm the accuracy of the one-seventh and six-sevenths formula of the Education Department, it by no means proves its reliability. His estimates, in common with those already cited, are open to other objections. Any calculation of the number of children whose education had to be subsidized needed to take into account, not so much individual income, as total family income. It also had to allow for such quantifiable variables as the size and age structure of the family as well as the non-quantifiable one of parental interest in education.

In any discussion of social class and school attendance it must be remembered that mid-Victorian observers had some, but only a limited, justification for equating willingness with ability to pay school fees. In today's society parental value-judgements on the worth of higher education for children vary not only between various income levels but within them as well. In the nineteenth century this was equally true of elementary education. Apart from other factors, readiness to pay school fees was determined both by income and occupation. One perceptive inspector, the Rev. D. J. Stewart, whose district included the university city of Cambridge, showed his awareness of this in his *Report* for 1856.⁴

In thirty-one schools . . . I saw 3,505 children. Of this number, only 1,629 were children of the labouring class; the others were the children of farmers; small shopkeepers, farm bailiffs, household servants, college servants, petty tailors, shoemakers, and etc., many of whom are, no doubt worse off than labourers in full work.

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Although Stewart's main concern was to demonstrate that children other than those of the labouring class used the schools receiving a government grant, his comments show that there was no simple correlation between income levels and attitudes towards education.

Granted that some of the farmers and small businessmen may have been worse off than the labourer in full employment, others were not. Hence the social structure of England and Wales by the 1860s was too complex to make a cut-off point of one-seventh valid. The Taunton Commissioners gave considerable attention to this social borderline where the lower middle classes and the more prosperous members of the working classes overlapped. They found that 'the education of what is sometimes called the lower section of the middle class is at present often conducted in the National and British schools', the very schools that had been surveyed by the Newcastle Commissioners during their enquiry into the education of the independent poor. Not surprisingly they commented, 'our inquiry into this most important part of our subject has been attended with unusual difficulties.'⁵

In their *Report* they had envisaged that the sons of 'the lower section of the middle class'—the sons of 'the smaller tenant farmers, the small tradesmen, the superior Artisans'—would attend a 'third-grade school' where they would receive a thorough grounding in the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. This level of attainment broadly corresponded with that expected of the top class of a voluntary school. Under Standard VI of the Revised Code, introduced by Robert Lowe in the early 1860s to monitor the scholastic performance of the schools and to determine the amount of their annual grants, a child was expected to 'read a short ordinary paragraph in a newspaper', write a similar passage of prose from dictation, and calculate 'a sum in practice or bills of parcels'. The mastery of such accomplishments would have qualified a boy for a clerkship in a mercantile office or some comparable career, the level of parental ambition of many from the top end of the working classes or the lower end of the middle. The duplication of the syllabuses paralleled that of the institutions. 'The lower divisions of the third-grade schools do not differ from good national schools except in as far as a higher fee may secure schoolmasters either of a higher social rank or of a greater professional skill.'⁶

The demands made by this socially amorphous group gave school managers an easy and acceptable market to satisfy. The children were seen as easier to handle and more highly motivated than those of the poorer sections of the working classes. Their regular attendance together

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with the opportunity of charging higher fees made the voluntary schools financially secure. When a school manager decided to go up-market he frequently did so at the expense of the very children for whom the school had been founded in the first place. Poor children were either excluded because the fees were too high or, if admitted to the bottom classes at a low fee, were accorded the lowest priority in the allocation of teaching resources. In 1895 H.M.I. Du Port described his experiences as a young curate at Holy Trinity Church, Marylebone, in the early 1860s.⁷

I was behind the scenes as a curate-manager of large and highly esteemed schools in London, teaching in them daily; and very pleasant hours did I spend with those 40 first-class boys over their Euclid, their history, and their arithmetic. My occasional visits to the second class, too, were, though, in a less degree, interesting and encouraging; but . . . the lower two-thirds fraction of the school was little better than an unorganized mass of children of all ages; of teaching properly so called they had none; . . . educational training began at the *second* class.

In this school the children of the skilled artisan travelled first class, those of the poor were in the steerage, the captain seldom came below deck.

School managers who provided a more advanced form of teaching had little reason to fear for the future prosperity of their schools. In making their schools the precursors of the higher elementary schools run by the school boards in the last decades of the century, they were remedying one of the major deficiencies of the English educational system. 'The schools that are wanting everywhere', the Taunton Commissioners declared, 'are good schools of the third grade.' This was demonstrably true of London where almost all schools 'are badly placed, inadequate in buildings and accommodation, and worst of all unsatisfactorily taught and conducted.' More than half of London's population were without any local endowment for education at all. Outside London the situation was little, if any, better. Apart from Birmingham and Liverpool, none of the remaining twelve towns with a population around the 100,000 mark, had an 'endowed school specially provided for boys in the third grade'. In fifty-four towns with populations between 20,000 and 100,000 there were only three or four at the most with any 'systematic provision of third-grade schools adapted to the wants of the lower middle classes'. Of the 52,000 boys reputed to be in endowed and proprietary schools offering secondary education in England and Wales, only 11,077 day scholars and 1,764 boarders

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were reported to be attending third-grade endowed schools. Yet some 255,000 boys alone were thought to require secondary education. This missing 80 per cent 'educated in private schools, or at home or not at all' provided ambitious voluntary school managers with a potentially rewarding market to tap.⁸

Businessmen patronized such schools in the belief that they offered their sons a sound education that would equip them for the commercial world. James Bryce, at this time an assistant commissioner to the Taunton Commission, found this view especially prevalent in South-East Lancashire, an area bounded by Burnley, Warrington, Wigan, and Stalybridge. This rapidly expanding manufacturing 'frontier' district he likened to parts of America and Australia. Here he detected little social pretension among the *nouveaux riches*. He depicted a 'society . . . in an unsettled and fluctuating state'. In this region he continued, 'Men almost, sometimes wholly, illiterate, have risen to prodigious wealth . . . A millionaire has cousins or even brothers among the operatives, and is socially on a level with his own workpeople, to whose class he belonged a year or two before.' Hence the Privy Council schools were used to a very large extent 'by those of what would be accounted [elsewhere] a socially superior class, the shopkeepers, the publicans, the foremen, and overlookers in the mills, nay even by the manufacturers themselves'. In some of the local towns and villages, where the National and British schools were the only ones available, the managers ran special classes. For a fee of 6d or 1s a week a pupil could receive instruction in history, geography and even Latin. Bryce found what he described as a misuse of government funds in both Manchester and Liverpool. Parents who could afford to pay the total cost of their children's education were using the voluntary schools thereby accepting state assistance intended for the independent poor. Bryce noted that the pupils included the children of shopkeepers, clerks, well-to-do artisans, and warehousemen earning up to £200 a year, men whom he considered well able to afford a fee of 15s or £1 a quarter for a private school. Such parents doubtless agreed with the archetypal businessman to whom Bryce attributed the opinion, 'I want my boy to write a good clear hand, and to add up figures quickly . . . Too much schooling oftener mars a man of business than it makes him'.⁹

Other assistant commissioners to the Taunton Commission provided similar evidence. J. L. Hammond, who investigated the counties of Northumberland and Norfolk, thought that the introduction of the Revised Code had made the voluntary schools more attractive than the

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‘private schools of the lowest class’. This was because ‘the first and indispensable requirement not only of the working but also of the trading classes, is a sound instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic, no school will meet with much favour if it sacrifices the essentials to any other branch of study’ Concentration on the basic skills allowed a boy to finish his ‘education’ as soon as possible, thereby not only enabling his parents to save on school fees but allowing them to profit from his contribution to the total family budget. As in parts of Lancashire so in Northumberland, Hammond found, ‘there is no social feeling to prevent a farmer or tradesman from sending his child to a Government school, the improvements caused by the grant in the form, if not the substance, of instruction are seriously affecting private educational enterprise.’¹⁰

J. G. Fitch observed the same phenomena in the West Riding of Yorkshire. ‘In many of the good schools under inspection and in receipt of aid . . . , I find an increasing number of children belonging to a class above that for which the schools were intended. The small shopkeepers, clerks, and superior workmen’, he added, ‘find the education given in a good National school is better suited to their needs than that which is to be purchased in small private academies.’ Some of these schools had developed senior classes in which the fees were above the ninepence limit stipulated in the Revised Code. Such a step, debarring the pupils from qualifying for the government grant, enabled the managers to employ better qualified masters. Thus the syllabus of the Leeds parish school included geometry, algebra, and Latin. Similar classes were held at British and National schools in York, Doncaster, and Hull.¹¹

The Independents and Baptists, after their secession from the British and Foreign School Society to form with others the Voluntary School Society, found that their bid for spiritual freedom had brought them the secular advantage of liberation from the social and monetary restrictions of the Revised Code. Instead of offering an elementary education for the children of the labouring poor at a cost that did not exceed ninepence a week, they had set up secondary schools that charged as much as 1s 3d a week. These schools, known as ‘training schools’, prepared their pupils for the middle-class examinations recently started by the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Some National-school managers had followed the example set by these prosperous nonconformists. They had given up all pretence of fulfilling their pastoral duty to the poor. They had farmed out their school to the master. This enabled him to run it as a business concern unaided

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either by government grants or private subscriptions. He kept the balance of the fees he charged after meeting the running expenses out of his pocket. Fitch found that 'Cases of this kind are daily multiplying.' These changes had been made at the expense of the poor for the schools had become 'essentially middle class, self sustaining and semi-private schools . . . not accessible to the children of the poor.'¹²

A few years earlier the Newcastle Commissioners had also given some thought to the social composition of the classroom to see whether the government grants were reaching the class for whom they were intended. While the inquiry was still in progress the Education Department categorically stated in its codification of the existing regulations 'The object of the grant is to promote the education of the children belonging to the classes who support themselves by manual labour.'¹³ During the course of his evidence R. R. W. Lingen, Secretary to the Education Department, stated that in the British and Wesleyan schools charging threepence or fourpence a week 'the parents . . . consist, to a very great extent of that class which is either at the top of the working class or at the bottom of the shop-keeping class.' Later on when asked 'Do you see a clear line between the classes now receiving aid and the classes immediately above them?', he hedged 'I think it is an exceedingly difficult line for the State to lay down, but it is found in practice that the feeling of independence acts very strongly, and that as soon as people can pay for their education, as a matter of fact they do so.'¹⁴

On this point the Commissioners' faith in the canons of established contemporary social theory came to their assistance. 'The feelings which tend to make the offer of gratuitous instruction unpopular, tend also to incline the parents to pay as large a share as they can reasonably afford of the expense of the education of their children.' In addition the Newcastle Commissioners alleged that the large majority of parents 'mistrust the value of a purely gratuitous education'. This was not entirely the product of that healthy spirit of independence that middle-class commentators so readily fathered on their social inferiors. Parents, who were able to afford a fee of three or fourpence a week, did not want their children sitting next to the verminous and unkempt sons and daughters of the near-pauper classes. For them there were the ragged schools that catered for 'that class which cannot associate with the children of respectable labouring men'.¹⁵ Hence J. D. Morell, an inspector of British schools in Lancashire, could argue that the most successful schools were those very ones that charged a fee of twopence to sixpence a week, a range that virtually excluded the children of the

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manual labourer from all but the bottom classes. He believed that the effect of reducing fees to a penny a week would be to empty the schools. 'A few children of the lowest classes would go in', he predicted, 'and then the mechanics, who considered themselves to be a little above those classes, would not let their children go in and learn with them.'¹⁶

When attempts were made to reduce the level of public expenditure after the Crimean War, one obvious economy the Education Department could make was to ensure the strict observance of the expressed intention of the grant they administered. Confinement of the benefit of the grant to the children of the labouring poor would dissuade better-off parents from relying on state aid, a practice that if it became habitual was believed to lead its adherents to lose all self-reliance. This was the primrose path that ended at the gate of the workhouse. Hence Lingen, notwithstanding his earlier hesitation, attempted to lay down the 'exceedingly difficult line' between those parents eligible for state assistance and 'the classes immediately above them.' In January 1864 he issued a series of instructions to assist the inspectorate in deciding whether a particular child belonged to the classes supporting themselves by manual labour. In drafting these regulations, Lingen showed he realized that a man's occupation could not necessarily be related precisely to his social class. For instance the term 'clerk' which, *prima facie*, has a connotation of occupational homogeneity, by the 1860s covered a wide socio-economic spectrum. The Department, adopting a somewhat Marxist stance, argued that men in skilled trades such as those of the mason, carpenter, tailor, blacksmith, mariner, or fisherman, who employed labour were *ipso facto* ineligible for financial assistance from the state towards their children's education. As employers, they profited from the labour of others. They did not support themselves by their 'own labour alone'. Humbler folk such as simple policemen, coastguards, and dock and railway porters, presented no problem. They could 'commonly be regarded as working men'. Their immediate superiors, 'petty officers in those services, excisemen, pilots and clerks of various kinds', taxed the skill of the amateur social classifier to the utmost. In making their decision, inspectors were urged to ask about the father, 'Does he rank and associate with the working men or with the tradesmen of the place?' Such a question took the decision out of the hands of the inspectors for it recognized the social classification made by the working classes of one of their fellows as the effective one. Another consideration enjoined on the inspectorate also posed problems. They could ask themselves whether it was unreasonable to