

School attendance medals: Reflections on the early years of compulsory education

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Figure 1. Front and back of school attendance medal for H. Marner, 1908, 1991/129/1, Worthing Museum. Photograph by Bridget Millmore.

I remember when I was growing up how my school reports included details of attendance and the number of days that I was absent or late. I never took much notice of these figures because I was rarely ill or late. Neither did my teachers or parents comment on them, focussing instead on grades and results. However, if you are a regular browser in antique or second-hand bookshops, you will have no doubt come across books given as school prizes and in some instances as prizes specifically for school attendance. So why was school attendance something to be incentivised and commemorated, particularly in the early 1900s? Why were prizes such as medals given? Worthing Museum and Art Gallery holds a number of such school medals that date from the early twentieth century. This essay explores one of them in more detail. What might this object from the Museum's archives tell us about attending school over a hundred years ago?

The medal in question was awarded to one H. Marner in 1908 (Figure 1). It is engraved and has a ribbon and bar in the style of military medals. The medal and bar are made of a white metal whilst the ribbon is a dark blue. On one side of the medal is shown the outline of Worthing's coat of arms that celebrates the town's maritime, fishing and market gardening

associations.¹ Around the border of the medal are the words ‘Worthing Education Committee’. On the reverse of the medal are ribbons of text set against a background of what appears to be the branch of an oak tree. The oak is often used as a symbol for knowledge and so it is not surprising to find the familiar crenelated outlines of oak leaves on this medal. It is engraved with the words ‘FOR TWO YEARS PERFECT ATTENDANCE 1908’ and the name H MARNER. The words ‘TWO’, ‘1908’ and ‘H MARNER’ were clearly added after the medal was produced indicating how medals were manufactured in quantity and then personalised for each pupil.

H. Marner attended school in Worthing in the first decade of the twentieth century. While we are unlikely to learn more about H. Marner without additional family details, we can discover more about schooling in Worthing at the time this medal was awarded. Local archives and historical accounts of education can provide a context for this object. The Elementary Education Act of 1870 required local councils such as Worthing’s to ensure school places were available to all children.² Ten years later school was compulsory up to the age of ten. The government awarded grants for both attainment and regular attendance and so schools looked for ways of motivating pupils to attend. The reasons for children’s absences from school were many and varied depending on a range of factors including geographical, social and economic situations. However, what primarily underpinned children’s patterns of absence was the expectation that young people would work when needed to contribute to family economies. In an area such as Worthing school attendance was linked to the agricultural calendar. Worthing’s coat of arms reminds of its market gardening roots. At times of intense periods of labour on the land all family members were required to help. This pattern of behaviour was well established and consequently unlikely to change immediately as a result of the introduction of compulsory schooling. As Nicola Sheldon explains in her doctoral thesis on school attendance, ‘cultural patterns and expectations were likely to linger beyond the imposition of legal restraints on child labour and the enforcement of compulsory attendance at school.’³ Not surprisingly providing incentives for attendance was vital in finding ways to change such long-established traditions of work.

Children and their families were often proud of medals and the successes made manifest in such objects. Sheldon comments that attendance prizes whatever shape they took were a

¹ The coat of arms includes blue and silver wavy bars representing the sea; three silver mackerel symbolising Worthing’s fishing industry; a Horn of Plenty referring to Worthing’s market gardening and the figure of Hygieia, the Ancient Greek goddess of health holding a snake characterising the town’s motto. Translated from the latin this reads ‘From the land plenty, from the sea health’.

² Cedric Dry, *School Attendance Medals of England, Scotland and Wales* (Whitmore, 1992) 4-6. See also, <https://collectingchildhood.wordpress.com/2012/07/21/never-absent-never-late/> and http://www.mernick.org.uk/attendance/medals/m_Intro.htm

³ Nicola Sheldon, *School Attendance 1880-1939: a study of policy and practice in response to the problem of Truancy*, University of Oxford, 2008, doctoral thesis, 33.

‘visible reminder of the achievement’ and ‘a talking point for proud parents’.⁴ However, we cannot ignore the fact that these medals also draw attention to school absences and the main reason for school absences, which was child labour. In 1880 school was compulsory for children aged 5 to 10 years old. However, this also meant that children were legally allowed to work from the age of ten. They often worked long hours in poor conditions and were subject to mistreatment from employers and other workers. Sadly, as Emma Griffin in her British Library article on *Child Labour* explains, ‘Even when parents were aware of their children’s abuse, poverty often meant they were unable to take any effective action.’⁵ As well as seasonal labour, some children worked part time alongside their schooling. Sheldon remarks that ‘even where opportunities for child labour contracted, parents sought other outlets for their children to earn and supplement the family income.’⁶ The school leaving age was raised to 11 in 1893 and to 13 in 1899. It remained at 13 years of age when H. Marner was at school.

Documentary evidence from the West Sussex County Council archives illustrate how once attendance was compulsory, processes were set up to check school registers. Quarterly reports, for instance, were submitted by the School Attendance Officer to the Borough of Worthing’s Education Committee. The typed statistics on attendance were annotated with hand-written notes recording events that might have affected the data, including school closures and children’s illnesses. The figures for Christmas 1907, for example, are accompanied by a note explaining that schools in the Borough were closed on account of diphtheria and measles (Figure 2). The information compiled by the Attendance Officer provide percentage attendance figures and comment on annual improvements in the statistics. Individual schools kept logbooks that recorded details of lessons as well as children’s absences and concerns about the condition of the school building. The logbook for Christ Church School in Worthing, for example, reveals the poor and sometimes unsanitary conditions at the turn of the century commenting on odours from drains as well as low temperatures and feeble light in the winter months (E/218F/12/4).

⁴ Sheldon, 169.

⁵ <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/child-labour>

⁶ Sheldon, 33.

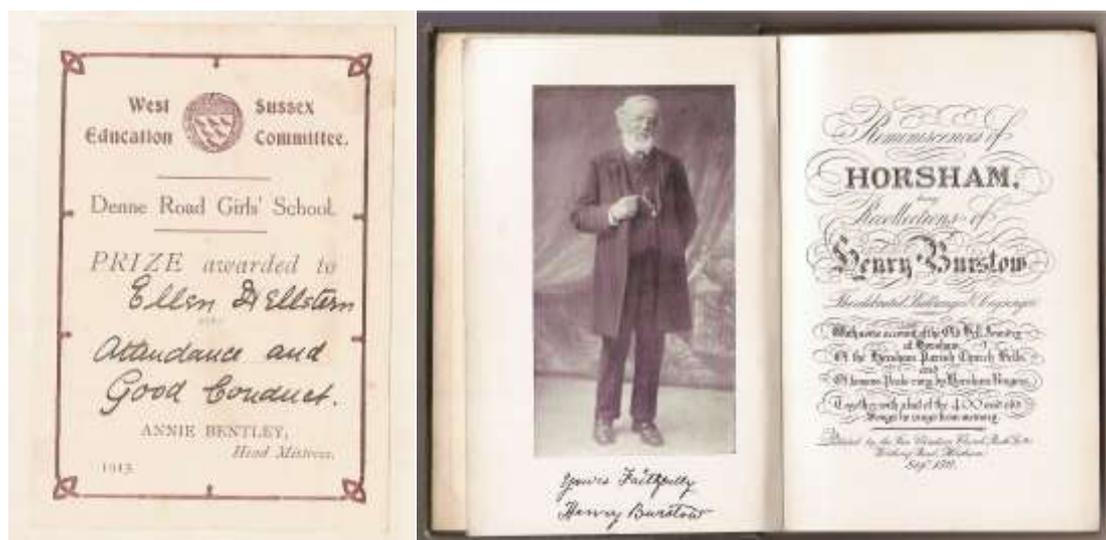


Figure 3. Ellen Ellstern's school prize book plate, 1913 and title-page and frontispiece of *Reminiscences of Horsham* by Henry Burstow, Free Christian Church Book Society, 1911.

Figure 3 shows an example of a label inserted into a book given as a prize in 1913 to Ellen Ellstern who attended Denne Road Girls' School in Horsham. The prize was awarded for both good attendance and conduct. Indeed the importance of conduct and good behaviour was gradually supplanting that of attendance. The book chosen for Ellen's award is Henry Burstow's *Reminiscences of Horsham* published in 1911, reflecting the importance of learning about locality and history. Denne Road girls' school was an elementary school built in 1895 and by 1914, the year after Ellen received her prize, there were 141 girls at the school aged between 5 and 14.⁹

The Christ Church logbook records how in May 1908 'a whole day holiday was given on Friday for attendance' and two months later in July 'Alderman Cortis distributed the prizes for Attendance on the 30th. He also tested the registers on the 29th.'¹⁰ These incentives were clearly successful. Indeed, in extreme examples parents and children were so focussed on attaining perfect attendance and 'winning' the prize that local doctors became concerned about the spread of infectious illnesses that occurred as a result of children going to school regardless of their health. In the same year as H. Marner received a medal, the Children's Act included the following changes: children were banned from begging; penalties were given to shops selling alcohol and tobacco to children; juvenile courts were established to separate adult and child defendants and the death penalty was abolished for children although they could still be whipped.¹¹ In the early twenty-first century attendance is no longer incentivized in the same way as it was in the early 1900s, however the importance of recognising achievement continues in schools today.¹²

⁹ British History online, Horsham education <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/sussex/vol6/pt2/pp198-202>

¹⁰ Christ Church School logbook, West Sussex Archives, E/218F/12/4

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zxr6fg8/revision/4>

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jan/29/star-of-the-week-do-primary-school-rewards-do-more-harm-than-good>

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