



Visiting the 1820s Historic Classroom with your class

School groups visit the Historic Classroom as part of a visit to Robert Owen's School for Children. Unless you have booked a roleplay session you and your class will explore this fascinating room at your own leisure. This short guide can be used to help the class to explore.

1. Introduction to the Classroom – Read this to the class on arrival

This classroom is a reconstruction of a typical classroom of the 1820s when Robert Owen was the mill manager at New Lanark. It is the type of classroom that Annie McLeod would recognise. Robert Owen built two schools for educating the villagers – the building you are in now and the Institute for the Formation of Character. Children could attend school from as soon as they could walk until they were 10 years old. The youngest children attended nursery school in the Institute.

Robert Owen believe that it was important that children went to school and got an education rather than working from an early age. Few other mill owners were like Robert Owen – most were only interested in making a profit from their industry. For this reason the children at New Lanark were lucky. They received a good education and learned a broad range of subjects that you would recognise today.

Lessons started at 7.30am and with 2 breaks, finished at 5pm. In winter there was only one break but the school day finished earlier. Classes were much larger than they are today. There were only 4 rooms in this building all of which were used as classrooms.

There were about 12 teachers in New Lanark in Owen's time working between the 2 schools. The teachers were chosen for their good nature and ability to engage children. They did not use harsh words or physical punishment. Mr Owen did not allow this.

The children were taught a variety of subjects and they were even taken out of doors for some lessons. Interesting objects were brought into the classroom to bring lessons to life, including a real crocodile which Robert Owen purchased for 5 shillings! You can see it at the front of the room. Also, all pupils had to wear a uniform at school. They were like roman tunics. Owen insisted that all children should be clean and tidy.

2. Dressing up – Allow your pupils to try on the tunic uniforms at the back of the room

3. Question & Discussion – Ask pupils the following:

- What are the differences between this classroom and a classroom today?
- Look around the room at the artefacts and from these guess the different subjects that children learned in the 1820s. As you talk about the different subjects try some of these activities:

4. Activities

- Arithmetic & Maths – Recite the 5 times table or ask some simple sums.
- Handwriting practice – Write out the alphabet in your best handwriting.
- Geography – Ask pupils to name countries, rivers or capital cities on the map or globe.
- Nature Studies – Meet the crocodile [ask about its habitat/diet] or draw an animal [from wall friezes.]
- Dancing and Drill – Try a simple dance like Grand Old Duke of York or stretching & marching.

5. Classroom Film – Seat the class on the floor at the back of the room and start the film. Meet Mr James Buchanan, one of the first infant teachers in the school. The film lasts for 7 minutes. *Make sure the class is ready before starting the film. Once triggered it cannot be stopped or restarted.*



Background Notes for Teachers

Early Education in Scotland

Although from 1696 Scotland had a reasonably good system of **Parish Schools**, where most children were given a basic education, it came under huge pressure as the **Industrial Revolution** gathered pace. Increasingly children were sent to work in the new factories, some as young as 5 years old, to earn a wage. In addition, there were not enough schools in the new industrial towns to accommodate them.

By the early 19th century many towns and villages were without schools at all. Children from wealthy backgrounds were taught at home by a **tutor**, and a small number of children were taught in **charity schools**. New schools following the **Bell and Lancaster** systems were opening up, using children as '**monitors**' to instruct the younger children, passing down knowledge from one generation to the next. However, on the whole children were lucky if they received reading, writing and some religious instruction. **Educating the poor** was just not something people were willing to invest in or believed was worthwhile.

The **1872 Education Scotland Act** made compulsory elementary education in reading, writing, arithmetic and religion for children between the ages of 5 and 13. **Local School Boards** were responsible for administering the act – appointing teachers, adapting or building new schools, and deciding fees. The act was unpopular with parents and pupils alike and truancy was a major problem. The teachers were strict and pupils were forced to learn through drilling, rote learning and corporal punishment. Although Owen's education system was implemented at New Lanark over 50 years before this Act was introduced, its approaches and principles were ahead of their time, and far more like present day education than the Board Schools. In 1875, the New Lanark School ceased to be run by the mill company and became a Board School.

Robert Owen's Views on

Education and the Formation of Man's Character

The essence of Owen's view of the individual was the concept that a man's character is formed **for him and not by him**. From this view stemmed his whole approach to society, and his confidence in **using education as a tool for moral and social change**. Robert Owen had boundless belief in the **effect of environment and training** in the character of a child. This effect would continue throughout childhood, and even into adulthood. He stated:

"... children in all parts of the earth have been, are, and everlastingly will be impressed with habits and sentiments similar to those of their parents and instructors; modified, however, by the circumstances in which they have been placed, and by the peculiar organisation of each individual"

It was at New Lanark that he put his social theory into practice. It took him several years to establish however, and the **Institute for the Formation of Character** – a 'community education' centre - did not open until 1816, exactly 16 years after Owen came to New Lanark.

Owen knew it was important to **find partners who were sympathetic** to his desire to educate the working classes. This was not the case with his early partners, and it was not until he formed his new partnership in 1814, with philanthropic men with the same ideals as Owen, that he was at

last able to pursue his goals. He **publicised his ideas widely**, and gave regular speeches and lectures both at home in New Lanark and further afield.

He believed education should be the **common right of children, rich or poor**. The poor should grow to have dignity and become useful members of society. This was not the general opinion of the aristocracy at that time.

Although he was not personally religious, he did support the building of church related schools so long as they were open to all, regardless of their beliefs. He was willing to compromise so long as he could get those with power and influence to take up the cause of education.

It was also in his own interests to influence the minds of his 'human machines', making them into more efficient, healthy workers. He wanted a **universal enforcement of a ten-hour working day, for adults as well as children**. Thus, if people were not too exhausted after their work in the mill, they would be more likely to partake in evening classes.

No rewards or punishments were to be used in the school, except those provided by nature itself. If punished, a child would be made to feel useless, humiliated or incompetent, which in turn would destroy the spirit and the desire to succeed, and form weaker character. Rewards, were also undesirable as they generated proud and overbearing individuals, often irrational and uncompassionate for others less successful.

"How much longer shall we allow generation after generation to be taught crime from their infancy, and, when so taught, hunt them like beasts in the forest, until they are tangled beyond escape in the toils and nets of the law?"

Owen's Education System

The learning environment

Owen did not want memory to replace reason and observation. Therefore the younger pupils took part in activities which appealed to the senses, not just memory power. Lessons were not be learned mechanically without being clearly understood (see quote by Robert Dale Owen below). So when the older children were taught to read, they were also taught to understand what they were reading.

In summer much of the teaching would be done in the open air, by country walks, by direct study of nature, and by simple play. He asked in his *Book of the New Moral World*:

"Where are these rational practices to be taught and acquired? Not within the four walls of a bare building in which formality predominates.. But in the nursery, playground, fields, gardens, workshops, manufactories, museums and classrooms".

Visual aids were used in the classrooms in the form of maps, charts, and pictures. Ultimately an environment and atmosphere was to be created which was favourable to good sentiments and ideas, thus avoiding the need for discipline and punishment.

The Institute was to accommodate more than just the children of New Lanark, and anyone in the surrounding neighbourhood who could not afford to educate their children were welcome to send them to this establishment. No distinction was made between the children of the best and worst families. Indeed, he preferred to receive the offspring of the worst, at an early age, because they would benefit from the care and attention.

There was no charge for the adult or infant classes. The older children paid 3d a month for their instruction which did not even cover one twentieth of the school expenses. This came from the profits made by the proprietors, including profits from the Village Store.

School Uniforms

The schoolchildren wore uniforms in the style of a Roman tunic. It was made from cotton cloth with a maroon band (also stated as tartan in some accounts) along the base. Such style allowed free movement when dancing. Other accounts state that the children's dress was mixed. Some were well dressed and others bare footed and dressed in their working clothes.

The Institute

Owen built two school buildings in the village for the purposes of education – the Institute for the Formation of Character and the School for Children. Both still stand today. The Institute has been documented more extensively than the School for Children. A selection of descriptions follow:

"The building, which is centrally placed, and forms an ornamental part of the village, is 145 feet long by 45 feet broad, and of three stories in height, having a considerable enclosed area or play-ground in front: the first storey in front is divided into three apartments, the other into two, the largest of which is fitted up so as to serve also as a general lecture-room or chapel; and being provided with a gallery, accommodates 1000 or 1200 persons"

"The youngest, or infant class, under the age of five, are of course occupied only in the amusements which are suitable to their age, playing about in the area before the school when the weather admits in, under the charge of a male and female superintendent, and whose principal office it is to encourage amongst them habits and feelings of goodwill and affection towards one another."

(Robert Dale Owen, Outline of the System of Education at New Lanark, 1824)

"Our party walked down to the village, and entered the children's play-ground. God bless their little faces, I see them now. There were some bowling hoops, some drumming on two sticks – all engaged in some infantine amusement or other. Not a tear – not a wrangle. Peaceful innocence pervaded the whole group. As soon as they saw us, curtsies and bows saluted us from all quarters. From the playground we entered a large room for the purpose of play and amusement, when the weather will not permit them to be out of doors Here the most unrestrained liberty is given for noise and amusement."

(Extracts from The New Views of Mr Owen, impartially examined by Dr Henry McNab, 1819)

Items in the Historic Classroom

Reproductions of unique items based on historical documentary evidence include:

Musicians Gallery- This is the original Gallery from which musicians would play to the children dancing below. It would also be used by the band for concerts.

Globe-"In one apartment of this building there is a terrestrial globe, about nineteen feet in circumference, made, painted and fitted up by persons belonging to the establishment." (Davidson *History of Lanark* 1828)

Streams of Time Wall Charts – Based on Joseph Priestly's- *A Description of a New Chart of History* they display world history since 1200 BC using "Seven large maps or tables, laid out on the principle of the Stream of Time, and which were originally purchased from Miss Whitwell, a lady who formerly conducted a respectable seminary in London – are hung around a spacious room. These, being made of canvas, may be rolled up at pleasure. On the streams, each of which is differently coloured, and represents a nation, are painted the principal events which occur in the history of the nations. Each century is closed by a horizontal line drawn across the map. By means of these maps, children are taught the outlines of Ancient and Modern History, with ease to themselves, and without being liable to confound different events or different nations."

(Robert Dale Owen's Outline of the System of Education at New Lanark, 1824)

Visitor Accounts

Travel writing is not a new idea, and visitors who came to see Owen's village wrote in great detail of his schools, especially the Institute. The Historic Classroom has been recreated using extensive documentary and illustrative evidence of Owen's system of education. Here are some extracts from visitor's accounts of the schools at New Lanark.

"I found there a music school. Half a dozen or more little fellows had each a flute, and were piping away in notes that did not preserve the strictest tunefulness.....From this we went into a large room above stairs where there were fifty or sixty young people, both boys and girls, attending to the lessons of a dancing-master. These young students of the "merry mood" were not equipped in all the gaiety of a fashionable ball-room; though there was a great diversity in costume. In fact, they were in much the same style as that in which they left the manufactory – some with shoes, and others barefoot"

(Prof J Griscom – American Quaker & Professor of Chemistry & Natural Philosophy, New York Institute, 1819)

"After marching, the boys and girls destined to sing, at the word of command run in a kind of dance, and formed two lines in the centre of the square. They then sung, accompanied by a clarinet "When first this humble roof I knew" "The Birks of Aberfeldy" "The Banks and Braes of Bonny Doon" and "Auld Lang Syne"

(Dr Henry Mc Nab - Physician to the Duke of Kent, Queen Victoria's father, 1819)

"The Geography lesson was now to be exhibited and it was surprising to hear with what readiness Boys of from seven to ten years old gave the names of rivers with uncouth names, of distant seas and countries, at the pointing of a Wand over a large map of the world placed on a frame near the head of the room, the class standing in a semi-circle before it. The room is hung round with materials for study – paintings of beasts and birds, fossils and flowers. The flowers (with all their parts according to botanical arrangement) are painted on a great length of canvas, which is unrolled for exhibition, at the same time winding up again from the bottom."

(Dorothy Wordsworth - sister of William Wordsworth, 1822)

Further reading:

Historic New Lanark. Donnachie and Hewitt (Edinburgh University Press 1993)

The Story of Robert Owen. NLT publication (published 1997)

The Story of New Lanark. NLT publication (revised 2008)

All of these are available in the Gift Shop and via mail order. Please see the list of resources and publications for more details