

BI-CENTENNIAL CELEBRATIONS 1777-1977

THOMAS STOCK-PIONEER

Who was the first ? How often controversy rages over the problem—and how often we are surprised to discover that pre-eminence does not in fact always belong where we had hitherto supposed. The first steam locomotive engine, the first crossing of the Atlantic by air, the first discovery of the mainland of America and the origin of its name—how seldom can the right answer be found. For so often it is not the inventor or originator who popularises or develops the new idea. The effects of inoculation against smallpox were known before Jenner's day.

So it is with the origin of Sunday Schools. In truth Robert Raikes may be called the founder of the Sunday School Movement, for through the publicity which he gave to the conception through the pages of his own paper, " The Gloucester Journal " he raised it " from a fortuitous rarity into a universal system ".

Here we are concerned with the most important of Raikes's co-workers—The Revd. Thomas Stock, whose fame rests upon the work which he had begun in 1777 while Curate of Ashbury in Berkshire. In the chancel of St. Mary's, the ancient parish church, Stock gathered together the children for free education every Sunday. It was not long before their numbers grew to such an extent as to make Stock move his pupils into a cottage lent for this purpose by the Craven Estate. This cottage still stands and may justly claim to be the pioneer for a fully Christian education.

When, in 1778, Stock moved to Gloucester and joined forces with Raikes, he left behind him the first Sunday School to have its own separate building given for that purpose, where not only religious instruction but lessons in reading, writing and arithmetic were given. Its place was later taken by a church school which served for nearly a hundred years until a growing population and the requirements of the 1944 Education Act made rebuilding necessary. Now the old school has been adapted for use as a village hall, and there stands instead in the village, a fine new modern school. So the four buildings are there as landmarks in the history of Christian teaching.

In the chancel of the Church there is a slate tablet with the inscription :—

**Be it remembered that in the chancel of this Church
The Reverend Thomas Stock, Curate of this Parish,
in the year 1777 opened a Sunday School. This later
became the first of its kind in England to be housed
outside the Church in a building of its own : still to
be seen near the present Church School**

and showing a representation of Stock surrounded by eager Ashbury children "hanging on his lips".

Indeed, Ashbury can claim a unique association with the growth of free education in this country—as well as the historic importance of its church and its famous prehistoric remains.



THE Rev. THOMAS STOCK, M.A.

1750 - 1803