

Two Gates Ragged School



John Pounds

JOHN POUNDS

THE RAGGED SCHOOLS

Some 250 years ago, Portsmouth was a small town surrounded by fortifications, moats, bastions and entered by six gates. It was here that John Pounds was born, on the 17th June 1766. The country was in turmoil and it was a time of Parliamentary corruption, Ministerial corruption and when attacks were being made on the liberty of the press. The non-conformist Church, as we know it today, was struggling for its existence.

It was the days of the press gangs and we were losing our American colonies, (The most powerful man in England) one hundred forty years previously, the Duke of Buckingham was assassinated (1628) in the same street where John Pounds was born.

Hygiene, public health as we know it today, was non-existent. It was an era of slums, courts, back alleys, drunkenness and all the infamy, squalor and vice associated with a sea-faring port of those days.

Into this picture and into these conditions John Pounds was born in St. Mary's Street. We know very little of his parents or his early life, as in 1766 writing and keeping of records was not the privilege of the poor. We do know, however, that his father was a sawyer, employed in H. M. Dockyards and in 1778 John Pounds was apprenticed as a shipwright in the dockyard.

When 15 yrs. of age in 1781 John Pounds fell off the staging of a ship in the dock. There were no ambulances in those days, no hospitals or doctors for the likes of his class. He was put on a barrow and wheeled home, a distance of about a mile. He was crippled and deformed for life, "a heap of broken bones and all out of joint". There was no compensation or sickness benefit in those days, so John Pounds, crippled and bent almost double, was apprenticed to an old shoe maker in the High Street, to learn

rough cobbling and with whom he stayed for some 20 yrs. The old shoe maker died and in 1803 John Pounds took unto himself a small wooden shop in St Mary's Street where he was born, lived and died.

This wooden shop is of cardinal, historical importance. It had two rooms; the shop on the ground floor, measuring 16 ft by 7 ft. and a living room above. It could well have been mistaken for poor woodsman's hut in a forest. John Pounds never married but remained a bachelor all his life. Here in his wooden shop he worked and looked after himself for the next fifteen years. His water supply was from a pump in the street and his lighting tallow candles.

It is now 1803 and from his open door he could see ships being fitted out to meet the expected invasion of Napoleon. Portsmouth was all excited and in a year or so, Lord Nelson set out for his last victorious but ill-fated voyage, only a stones throw from his little shanty. John Pounds was oblivious to all this activity and worked quietly on, his mind centred on other things.

At this time he decided he should do something to help his crippled nephew. John Pounds had a brother - a sailor - whose little boy was born with both feet turned inward and overlapping one another. John was now well over fifty years of age and gazing on his nephew, a mere crippled boy, began a compassion "for all little children in need of sympathy and help". From this incident emerged something destined to change the course of British history and was responsible for the attention of the "Powers that be" to do something for the poor and under-privileged.

John Pounds took this little boy into his home and nursed him and cared as tenderly as a mother - and further - he set to work to remedy the boy's deformity of overlapping feet and what is more he succeeded. John Pounds made him special boots and cured him absolutely. A miracle of surgery without a surgeon. John Pounds taught this boy the art of cobbling and they lived together until John Pounds died.

It is now 1818 and at the age of 52, an age when most people find children a little tedious, began the greatest adventure

of his life. John Pounds, during the three years he was forced by his accident to stay at home, taught himself to read from old leaves of the bible, bills of sale, election posters and the like. He was thus self educated, which was coupled with his gift of teaching. This is the essence of the story - he was a prince of teachers. So, in this little wooden shop, his thoughts centred on the poverty and distress of the ragged little urchins around him. The condition of poor children in the 18th century was appalling. Industry gobbled them up and they worked long hours in factories and mines. They were homeless many of them and slept where they could and infantile mortality was very high.

Public opinion was slowly being slowly influenced on the plight of these little children, but little was actually done. John Pounds resolved that something should be done, if only in a small way. He felt his little nephew wanted company and so, with hot baked potatoes or roast apples as the bait, he went into the alleys, the slums, the back - streets, the courts anywhere he could find these little urchins. He went like the pied piper of Hamelin and gathered to himself waifs, hooligans, thieves, pickpockets. His quarry was not the well - cared for but the worst possible characters, the vagabonds as he called them. His discipline was through gentleness and love and miraculously he created within these, the worst possible material, a desire to learn, to read and write.

Compare this, if you will, with the great teachers like Froebel and Pastalozzie in Zurich. Like headmasters of today, John Pounds had his preferences and he made a very careful study of the applicants. The test he applied was not the G.C.E. or the 11 plus, not the potential of the high social and educational status but the lowest possible grade. This wooden hut, in short, became the first Ragged School. The fee payers he turned away and the prospectus in bold letters over the entrance, was "Little vagabonds preferred". he taught mathematics by the counting of shoes. He even taught them how to make toys out of bits of wood, even guys for November the 5th from carrots. He was their doctor, their nurse in illness and somehow managed to find them all with special

clothes to attend church on Sunday. After church they left them till the following Sunday.

He also taught them to love nature and took them, 40 at a time, to Portsdown Hill and rambled about the countryside and taught them of God's love as expressed in the trees, flowers and birds. There was always, when they returned, a meal of hot potatoes.

With modern equipment and techniques, what limits could he have reached? How he managed to teach these children, 40 at a time, in a room 14 feet by 7 feet by 6 feet, to read, write and even make toy's and equip them to desire a better life and get his living at the same time must remain a mystery. People came from all over England to see John Pounds at work in his Ragged School. It was the means of the beginning of Ragged Schools all over England and at the turn of the century there were more than 600 of them affiliated to the Ragged School Union.

Lord Shaftesbury, perhaps the greatest social reformer we have ever known, was deeply moved at what the Ragged Schools were doing. He became President of the Union and he focused Parliament's attention to what the Ragged Schools were doing and the ultimate result was the Education Act. Paradoxically enough, most, if not all, were run by people with means who gave their time, talents and money to teaching the poor how to read and write.

Most of the Ragged Schools were improvised buildings into which forms were taken for seating accommodation. There is one form in Two Gates Ragged School and all the seating in High Town Ragged School are from the our foundation. High Town was built in 1863 and Two Gates in 1867. As far as we know these are the only two named Ragged Schools left in the country. I have visited the site in Portsmouth where John Pounds had the first Ragged School.

Some years ago a new church was built on the site, following the Presbyterian Creed. The name of the church is ' John Pounds Memorial Church' and his name is thus deservedly perpetuated. There is a small tablet at the side of the church to his

memory.

The winter of 1839 was a severe one and on 31st December, at the residence of Mr. Edward Carter who was Lord Mayor of Portsmouth at the time, John Pounds died suddenly as he



always wished he would - "As a bird drops from its perch' The spirit of John Pounds lived on in the public conscience of Portsmouth and the whole country was awakened to an outburst of generosity Ragged Schools and institutes for the poor were founded, bearing his name, and the name of John Pounds is one that will ever be remembered and written on the tablets of the immortals.

Cliff Willett's

John Pounds
'Teaching while at his work'

**TESTIMONY OF Rev. JAMES GUTHRIE
(Scottish Divine)**

It is rather curious, at least it is interesting to me, that it was by a picture that I was first lead to take an interest in Ragged Schools - in an old, obscure decaying burgh that stands on the shores of the Firth of Forth. I had gone there on a pilgrimage with a companion, not that there was any beauty in the place for it has no beauty. It has little trade. Its deserted harbour, silent streets old houses, some of them nodding to their fall. Bore all the marks of decay. One circumstance redeemed it from obscurity and will preserve its name to the last ages - it was the birthplace of Robert Chalmers. (Chalmers was born in 1780 and died in 1847. He was a theologian and economist).

I went to see this place many years ago and going into an Inn for refreshment, I found the room covered with pictures of shepherdeses with there crooks and sailors in holiday attire, not particularly interesting.

But above the chimney piece there was a large print, more respectable than the rest, which some skipper had bought to the town. It represented a cobblers room. The cobbler was there himself, spectacles on nose, an old shoe between his knees, a massive forehead and firm mouth, indicating great determination of character. From beneath his bushy eye brows benevolence gleamed out on a number of poor, ragged boys and girls, who stood at their lessons round the busy cobbler.

My curiosity was awakened and in the inscription, I read how this man, John Pounds, a poor cobbler of Ports mouth, taking pity on the multitude of poor ragged children, left by ministers and magistrates, ladies and gentlemen, to go to ruin in the streets, how like a good shepherd, he gathered in these wretched outcasts, how he had trained them to God and to the world and how, while

earning his daily bread by the sweat of his brow he had rescued from misery and saved to society multitude of these raggedly clothed children.

I felt ashamed of myself. I felt reprovod for the little I had done. My feelings were touched. I was astonished at this mans achievements and I well remember in the enthusiasm of the moment, saying to my companion, and I have seen in my clearer moments no reason for unsaying the saying:- "That mans an honour to humanity and deserves the tallest monument ever raised within the shores of Britain". I took up the man's history, for I found afterwards it animated the spirit of Him who " had compassion on the multitude". John Pounds was a clever man besides and like St. Paul, if he could not win a poor girl or boy any other way, he won them by guile. He would be seen chasing a ragged boy or girl along the quays and compelling them to come to his Ragged School, not by the power of a policeman but with the power of a hot potato. When the day comes when honour will be done to whom honour is due, I can fancy the crowd of those of whose fame the poets have sung, dividing like a wave and passing the great and noble and the mighty of the land, this poor, obscure cobbler stepping forward before them all and receiving the special notice of him who said, "inasmuch as ye did it to one of the least of these, ye did it unto me".