

Trading Stories, Working Lives

Graham Barker continues his occupational history series with Mary Jane and Clara Bramley, Victorian school mistresses and governesses

It's a fresh January morning in 1868. Let's stand on the junction of Union Street and Freeschool Lane, a few steps north of the High Street. Steam-powered spinning machines hiss and rattle at Fielding Johnson's Bond Street Mills over the road. A horse clip clops past, pulling a creaky cart laden with market produce. Now listen very carefully outside the corner house; children are chanting in unison "... 2 times 6 is 12, 3 times 6 is 18, 4 times 6 is 24..." Push open the door and peer inside. Miss Clara Bramley strides between the desks, reciting in time with the children. Her older sister Mary Jane jabs rhythmically down the multiplication table on the blackboard. Welcome to the Misses Bramley's academy at 20 Union Street, Leicester.



The new term has just started – a fact announced in the Leicestershire Chronicle and Leicester Mercury with unfailing regularity every January and July, from 1866 until 1871.

20, UNION-STREET, LEICESTER.
THE MISSES BRAMLEY will be happy to receive
their Pupils on Tuesday, January 21st.

Mary Jane, Emma and Clara Bramley – a trio of spinster sisters – run one of many private academies in Leicester. Mary Jane first appears as a schoolmistress aged only 17 (1861) and during the ensuing years her younger

sisters join her in running the Union Street schoolroom. But within a decade, all three have switched to become governesses. I'm keen to find out more.

To start, let's survey the scene with help from White's 1863 trade directory. Over 60 academies are scattered across the more salubrious parts of town. Most are day schools – about 10 accept boarders too – and women run two-thirds of them. Teaching is one of the few socially acceptable occupations for educated, unmarried women. Bright girls typically start out as 'pupil teachers' before setting up their own establishment. A handful of academies specialise in drawing, dancing or languages. Keen for your children to learn French or German? Then visit Francois Lefranc in New Walk or Augustus Schneider in De Montfort Street.

As local historian Jack Simmons writes, "No doubt some of [the academies] were good, but it is to be feared that the majority were indifferent or bad. They were under no effective inspection; they changed hands often; they were, for the most part, tiny units, much too small to attain even a modest level of efficiency."

Only one-third of Leicester's children regularly attended school in the mid nineteenth century and private academies helped supplement the woefully thin provision elsewhere: "The old Grammar School was dead... the Proprietary School had failed... the Collegiate School, after a useful life, ran into financial difficulties and it too was shut down in 1866. Here then was a town of 90,000 people offering no public education, and not much private, that went beyond the three Rs," explains Jack Simmons.

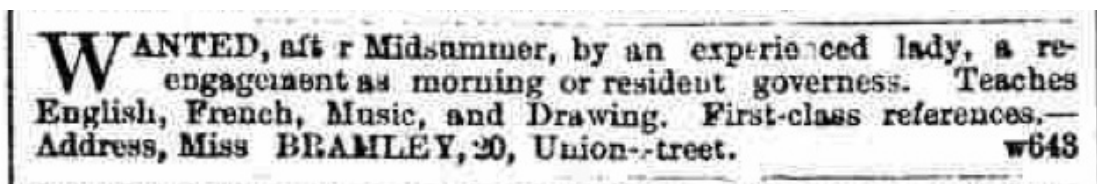
There were church schools – All Saints' School, for example, taught about 100 children "supported by voluntary contributions and an annual sermon" and St Mary's Schools "for the instruction in reading, writing, and accounts" educated about 260 poor children. Nonconformists might prefer the Great Meeting Schools with "two large and lofty school rooms, four class rooms, and three playgrounds, provided with swings and other amusements... attended by 700 boys and girls, who pay from 2d to 6d each week" or the National School "designed as a central or model school for the county... under the tuition of a master, mistress, and nine pupil-teachers."

Soon, however, all is about to change; the Elementary Education Act 1870 introduces a new national framework for schooling. Local School Boards are elected to broaden access to education for children aged 5-13. Hampered by sectarian disputes, the Leicester Board gets off to a slow start but by 1874 it has opened seven schools.

In all likelihood, it's this change in the educational landscape – coupled with better prospects elsewhere – that triggers the Bramley sisters to shift focus. By the end of 1871, Mary Jane has become a resident governess in Luton, Emma has married and moved to London, and Clara remains at Union Street working as a governess. As social historian Ruth Symes explains, "In the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s an unprecedented economic boom meant that far more families in the middle classes could afford to educate their daughters at

home for the first time. Keeping a governess became something of a status symbol and employers in this period included relatively lowly householders such as merchants, shopkeepers, industrialists and army officers.”

And so it is that Mary Jane travels south to take up her appointment as governess to Ellen, Annie, Alice and Eustace Seymour at Bury Farm near Luton (1871). “Depending on the age of her pupils,” writes Prof Kathryn Hughes, “the governess could find herself teaching the three Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic) to the youngest, while coaching the older girls in French conversation, history and ‘Use of the Globes’ or Geography. If her pupils were older teens, the governess would also be expected to instruct them in key accomplishments such as drawing, playing piano, dancing and deportment... The governess might also be in charge of small boys up to the age of eight, before they were sent away to school.”



WANTED, after Midsummer, by an experienced lady, a re-
engagement as morning or resident governess. Teaches
English, French, Music, and Drawing. First-class references.—
Address, Miss BRAMLEY, 20, Union-street. w648

In May 1880, Mary Jane is back in Leicester advertising her services in “English, French, Music and Drawing” as a morning or resident governess. It secures her next appointment, this time in Henry Bond’s household in Walcote (1881). Bond, a “farmer of 476 acres”, lives together with his wife, four daughters, three sons, a nursemaid, cook and dairy maid. Once again, Mary Jane has her hands full. In due course, another move follows – to north Wales, as governess to three children of the Rev William Edwards at Bangor Vicarage (1891).

Socially speaking, governesses often fell between ‘upstairs’ and ‘downstairs’. “Life as a Victorian governess,” writes Kathryn Hughes, “was one of loneliness and isolation... they did not belong with the servants, but were not treated as family members either.” For 19th-century novelists, therefore, governesses made for rich storylines: think Jane Eyre, Becky Sharp and Agnes Grey.



Whilst Mary Jane works far and wide, Clara remains in Leicester with her parents, a dutiful youngest daughter. She educates her nephew and niece before they emigrate to America, but Clara truly comes into her own in 1891, when Dr William Cawood Theed – a Highfield Street GP – invites her for an interview.

Dr Theed is in need of a governess to teach his children. His wife Amelia has recently given birth and is not coping well; such is her plight that she's admitted to Leicester Asylum in November 1891. Only three months later Dr Theed sails for Melbourne with his eight-year old son, Cawood, apparently abandoning his wife and three younger children. It seems shocking by today's standards but let us not be too quick to judge him. After all, a newspaper snippet mentions "...the state of Mr Theed's health compelled him to resign his appointment [at the Dispensary]", so perhaps he too was struggling.

With Dr Theed in Australia and his wife Amelia in the Asylum – where she remained for two and a half years – Clara takes Emily, Violet and baby Tom under her wing. Violet has been completely deaf from birth, so that brings particular challenges. Their father sends funds, we hope, but their mother remains a shadowy figure, readmitted to the Asylum at least one more time. By 1901, Clara has become guardian to the Theed children.

"Governesses often faced a bleak prospect in old age unless the families who employed them were kindly disposed enough to look after them," writes Ruth Symes. The Bramley sisters however have an inheritance coming their way; in 1898 their father Thomas dies and his executor and erstwhile employer,

Thomas Fielding Johnson, puts eight Bramley properties up for auction, including:

A DWELLING-HOUSE, No. 20, UNION-STREET, corner of FREESCHOOL-LANE, for many years in the occupation of the late owner, and now of Miss Bramley, containing entrance hall, dining-room, drawing-room, china closet, store closet, kitchen, four bedrooms, school-room, three arched cellars, private yard, and entry. The site is well adapted for trade requirements, being central, and in an improving district.

The Bramley sisters stay at Union Street several more years and Mary Jane continues to work as a music governess (1901). Piano scales float through the open window – some falteringly, others with confidence – where once we heard children chanting the multiplication tables. Times move on and so eventually do the Bramleys: Mary Jane becomes a boarding house keeper in Crescent Street, whilst Clara settles in Kimberley Road with her wards, Violet and Tom. And so it is that we leave them – governesses and guardians – to enjoy their final years in retirement.

Auntie Mabel: inspiring family histories

To read some of Graham's previous 'Trading Stories, Working Lives' articles, visit www.auntiemabel.org; as well as stories about Barrow lime workers, Loughborough boatmen, and postmen in Victorian Leicester, the site includes ideas for writing your own family history.