

The History of Catholic Education in England and Wales

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The Catholic Church was the first provider of schools and universities in England. The earliest schools were cathedral and monastic schools established from the late sixth century onwards. This growing network was joined by schools based around the larger collegiate churches and, from the twelfth century by the foundation of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge and their colleges.

At the Reformation in the 16th century, the monasteries were suppressed, and the existing schools re-founded. The Catholic Church's role as a provider of public education serving England and Wales was forced to go underground or abroad until the 1800s. The oldest Catholic schools and colleges still in existence date from this period: St Edmund's, Ware, was founded at Douai in 1568, Stonyhurst at St Omer in 1593, Downside School at Douai in 1607 and Heythrop College at Louvain in 1614. These returned to England in the late 1700s and early 1800s and were joined by schools founded by other monasteries that were making their way back to England at that time, such as Ampleforth College in 1802.

In 1847 a unique partnership was agreed with the State, and Catholic Poor-School Committee was established by the bishops of England and Wales (at that time still vicars-apostolic), to represent them collectively and to focus on the promotion of Catholic elementary education for the growing Catholic population, particularly fuelled by immigration in the big cities and industrial areas.

The ordinary Catholic hierarchy of diocesan bishops was restored in England and Wales in 1850, and held their first Provincial Council in 1852. Because the Church has always viewed education as vital to the formation and development of the whole person, they decided that the education of the poor was to be the Catholic community's first priority. They therefore put the setting up of Catholic schools for the Catholic community ahead of building Churches, often using its schools in those early days as the place for worship for the parish. In 1905 the Committee was renamed the Catholic Education Council and its remit enlarged to include secondary education (this later became the Catholic Education Service).

Catholic schools continued to be established throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which, at a time when state involvement in education was still very limited, meant that Catholic parents from poor backgrounds were nevertheless able to send their children to school. Service to those who are amongst the most disadvantaged in our society has also always been central to the mission of Catholic education. Many Catholic schools were established in the 19th Century to meet the needs of poor Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Catholic schools have successfully received the disadvantaged from new immigrant populations and integrated them into British society over many generations.

In 1944 the educational landscape across England and Wales changed forever with the passing of the Education Act 1944 (also known as the 'Butler Act'). This act promised 'secondary education for all' and increased the school leaving age to 15, meaning that all children from the post-war generation received a minimum of 10 years of education.

Under the Butler Act, most Catholic schools became 'voluntary aided' schools. This meant that they remained part of the state system of education, but with equality of revenue funding under local education authorities, whilst retaining their distinctively Catholic ethos through various legal protections which continue to apply to Catholic schools to this day. The settlement between Church and State meant that the funding of Catholic schools was shared by the Catholic foundations of the schools (in most cases the Dioceses or religious orders) and by the government. The first Catholic sponsored academies opened in 2005 and from 2011 some voluntary aided Catholic schools began to convert to academies.

The Church is also involved in higher education in England through its involvement in a range of higher education institutions. Following the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy, the Bishops' intention to establish schools meant that teacher training became a priority. With this in mind, a number of teacher training colleges were established (St Mary's, established in 1850, is one of the oldest). Some of these teacher training colleges have now been subsumed into larger universities (e.g. Roehampton University), and others have expanded to become universities in their own right (St Mary's, Newman, Leeds Trinity and Liverpool Hope). Thus, higher education in the Catholic tradition continues to flourish.

Through its involvement in primary, secondary and higher education, the Catholic Church currently educates over 800,000 pupils and students across England and Wales. As such the Church's stake in education is not only deeply embedded in our country's history, but through its continued collaboration with the state, is something that remains at the heart of the Church's mission, serving the Catholic community and contributing to the common good. The evidence of its success and its service to wider society may be seen clearly in the roles being played by Catholics in our nation today. Catholics contribute nationally in all strata of society, integrated and serving across all professions, in civic life, in charitable and voluntary endeavours and in sustaining and nurturing family life.

Historically Catholic education has flourished in England and Wales. It continues to do so today and will continue to act as a beacon and provider of good practice and authentic education.