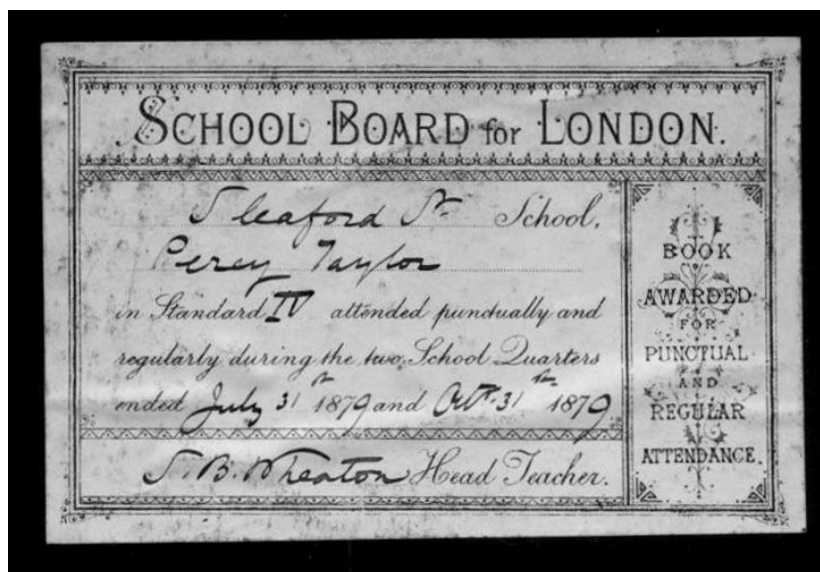


A Battersea School Prize from the 1870s

‘How Percy came to win an award’ could successfully describe the history research project undertaken last year by *Nicola Hale, Neil Robson and David Ainsworth*.



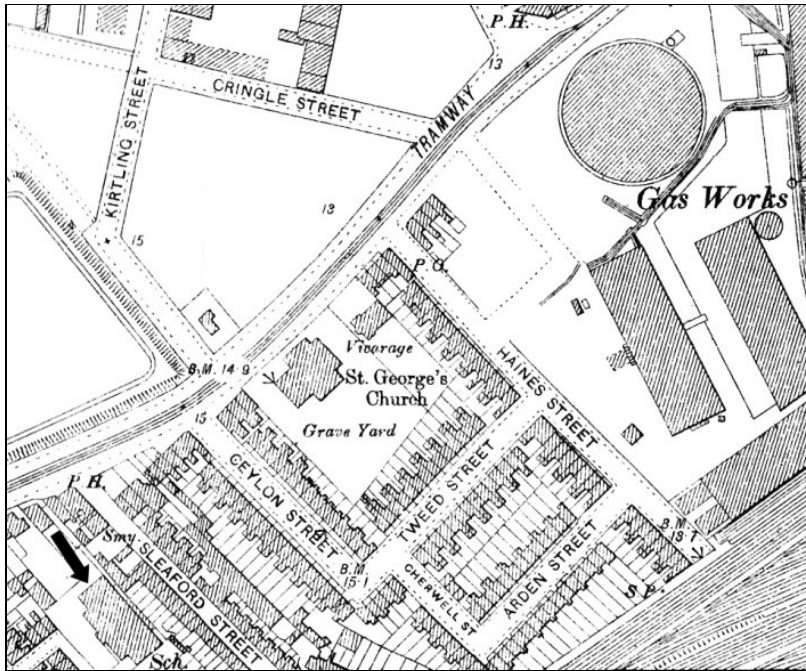
(David Ainsworth Collection)

Just look at the label reproduced at the start of this article; it was found inside the front cover of a school book-prize. The original is a mere 11½cm by 7½cm, and yet it has proved capable of yielding a rich mine of insights into everyday life and culture in working-class Battersea in the 1870s. Here is an account of the quest that enabled three local historians to open up its potential.

As the eclectic lettering at its top proclaims, it was the School Board for London (SBL), the principal education provider in the city between 1870 and 1904, that commissioned the label as part of a strategy to reward its pupils for regular attendance. Originally printed in blue, its frames of fretwork and other ornamental styles break up its austere rectangles, while small ‘corner cuts’ relieve the uniform geometry. The result is a neat specimen of Victorian fancy printing, and a telling example of a jobbing printer’s capabilities.¹

The prize was handed out at Sleaford Street School in the New Town area of Battersea. The three-storey building opened on 10 August 1874, and was amongst the first to come from the Board’s principal architect, Edward Robson. It was set in surroundings that were hardly salubrious, being positioned behind an already old row of houses dating back to 1813.² The headmaster in the late-1870s was Samuel Bird Wheaton, a man born in Dorset in about 1835, who, by the time of the 1881 census if not before, lived some distance away at 12 Queen’s Square, off Queen’s Road (now St Philip Square, Queenstown Road.).

The boy receiving the book was Percy Taylor, a Standard IV pupil who, according to the 1871 census, was born in about 1869. His early home was ‘1 Model House, Schedule 36, Lambeth’, almost certainly one of the model artisans’ dwellings built by command of Prince Albert for the 1851 Great Exhibition, and still in existence in Kennington Park. Assuming the 1881 census reflected the situation two years earlier, 10-year-old Percy was by 1879 living at 51 Haines Street, a relatively new house built in 1862 and less than a quarter-mile north-east of Sleaford Street School.³ His father was a foreman at the London Gas Light &



Detail from the OS map of 1894 showing the location of Sleaford Street School, Battersea (bottom left) and its closeness to Haines Street and the gas works.

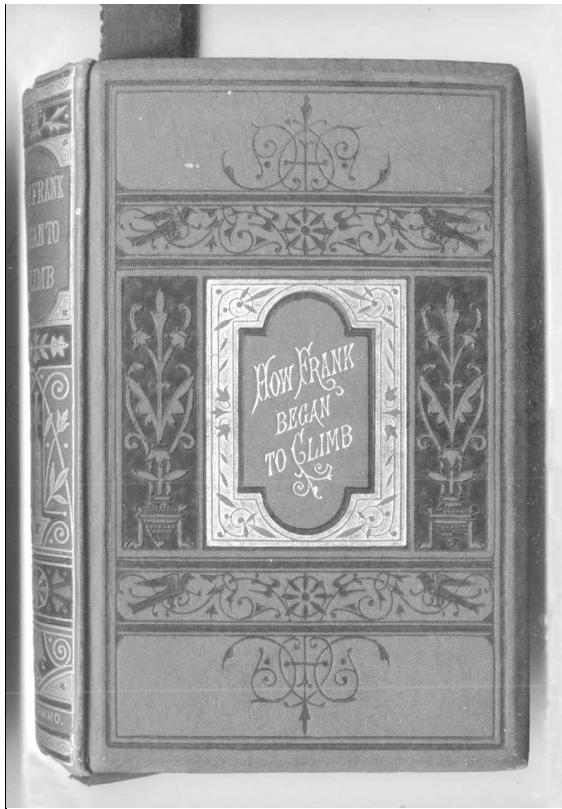
Coke Co. works, which were almost adjacent to their home, all part of a congested area in Nine Elms then witnessing profound changes just as the locality is experiencing right now.

Mention of ‘Standard IV’ recalls the framework for schooling set up by William Forster’s Education Act of 1870. Under its regulations pupils were examined by the Board’s inspectors to confirm their competence in the basic subjects of reading, writing and mathematics. This

would have meant in Percy’s case that he was studying to demonstrate his skills at reading aloud a short piece of poetry or prose, writing down accurately a sentence dictated just once from an elementary reading book, and showing competence at handling compound-unit arithmetic, i.e. weights and measures.⁴ Under the relevant SBL by-law Percy would not have been permitted to leave school until 1882 when he was 13.

Attendance was a continual problem for the Board. Children in the 1870s were an economic commodity, so it was not so much a matter of juvenile truancy, but rather that parents put their children out to work. The average attendance figure in the SBL’s schools in 1877, for instance, was only 80.2% of the total. In other words, one child in five was absent from school at any given time. To tackle the challenge of enforcing compulsory presence, a scheme was set up for awarding prizes for punctual and regular attendance. In short, Percy’s ‘prize’ was not to celebrate any particular talent or achievement on his part, but merely to acknowledge that he had turned up.⁵

The book he received was *How Frank Began to Climb the Ladder*, an improbably aspirational tale by Charles Bruce, produced in about 1873 by the Edinburgh-based publisher, William P. Nimmo. Following a sobering experience in which Frank Hunter, a friendless street urchin, is duped into taking part in a theft, our hero teaches himself to read and gets himself befriended by an elderly bookseller. The old man also takes in Frank’s former playmate, an orphan flower-seller called Emmy, who, in a melodramatic sub-plot, is injured when burglars enter the shop. She is taken to hospital with a broken leg, and there follows an engrossing description of the day-to-day routine on a surgical ward at the time. Whilst on a visit Frank resolves to become a doctor, gains his qualifications, marries Emmy, and demonstrates, in the closing words of the author, that ‘the soiled coin proved to be pure gold’.⁶



The cover of Percy Taylor's book-prize.
(David Ainsworth Collection)

Like Frank, Percy got married too, and by 1901 he was settled with his wife and their two children at 160 Elsley Road on the Shaftesbury Park Estate. By then he was a clerk, apparently with the same gas company as had employed his father. By 1916, when wartime conscription was first introduced, he would have been 47 and therefore too old for his call-up papers. Such rich pickings from just a little label, and if young Percy had been told about the methods nowadays used to make these discoveries, he would have been astonished.

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Notes

¹ Grafton, Carol Belanger (ed.), *Treasury of Victorian Printers' Frames, Ornaments and Initials* (Dover, 1984), 'Publisher's Note'.

² Bailey, Keith, *Battersea New Town 1790-1870* (WHS, 1980), pp. 13, 19, 20 & 33. The school's attendance registers from the period have survived and are now held at the London Metropolitan Archives. In 1951 the school was renamed the John Milton School, which, following demolition and rebuilding, eventually closed in the summer of 2004.

³ Bailey, Keith, 'The Battersea Estates of Frederick Haines' in *WH* 73 (2001), pp. 10-16.

⁴ 'Revised Code of Regulations, 1872', quoted in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elementary_Education_Act_1870 accessed on 4 November 2014. For a more detailed impression of the syllabus, see *The School Board Readers: Standard IV* (Charles Griffin, 1872), accessible via <https://archive.org/details/schoolboardreade00londrich>.

⁵ *Report of the School Board for London for the Year 1887/88* (1888), espec. pp. 26-27 & 70, and App. III, accessible via <https://archive.org/details/annualreportsch00boargoo>.

⁶ The following year Percy Taylor was again awarded a prize for regular attendance, a copy of *The Sea and her Famous Sailors* by Frank B. Goodrich. The fact that the two books were found still together at a book sale in Wimbledon in 2010 would appear to reflect the affection felt for them across several generations.