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The Decline of the Adult School Movement between the Wars

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This article considers the decline of the adult school movement, one of the largest voluntary movements in the history of adult education, and critically examines some of the reasons that have been used to explain it. It explores a number of features of the decline, using records of selected adult schools and adult school unions, and discussing variations by region and gender. The article argues that adult schools pursued a strategy of 'resistance' to secularisation, and that they increasingly concentrated on their core religious activities rather than attempting to compete with secular adult education providers. As a result, whereas the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had seen a rapid turnover of adult scholars, by the 1930s they were increasingly restricted to a committed core of members, dominated by older men and, especially, women. Reasons for the decline include the availability of alternative leisure pursuits, a lack of unity within the movement, and the association of the adult schools with unfashionable styles of Victorian philanthropy.

Keywords: adult schools, interwar Britain, secularisation, Quakers, adult education

In the first issue of this journal, published in 1972, Asa Briggs remarked: 'The study of the history of education is best considered as part of the wider study of the history of society, social history broadly interpreted with the politics, economics and, it is necessary to add, the religion put in.'¹ In the case of the history of adult education today, it still seems 'necessary to add' the religious dimension: the dominant narrative has emphasised the growth of secular provision, within an overarching – and, as David Nash has argued, somewhat problematic – framework of 'secularisation'.² The Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and university tutorial classes, as well as outgrowths of the labour movement such as the Central Labour College and Plebs League, have dominated the modern historiography of adult education in Britain, with comparatively little attention being devoted to religious movements.³ As Malcolm Chase has explained, historians of adult education are 'a leftwards leaning clan, apt to emphasize the WEA and extra-mural departments at the expense of other forms of adult education activity'.⁴ Similarly, John Field has remarked that 'most late twentieth century adult education historiography was profoundly sympathetic to radicalism and

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¹ Asa Briggs, 'The Study of the History of Education', *History of Education* 1 (1972): 5.

² David Nash, 'Reconnecting Religion with Social and Cultural History: secularization's failure as a master narrative', *Cultural and Social History* 1 (2004): 302-25.

³ Thomas Kelly, *A History of Adult Education in Great Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1970); Roger Fieldhouse and associates, *A History of Modern British Adult Education* (Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 1996); Stephen K. Roberts (ed.), *A Ministry of Enthusiasm: Centenary Essays on the Workers' Educational Association* (London: Pluto Press, 2003); John A. Blyth, *English University Adult Education 1908-1958: A Unique Tradition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983); Anthony Cooke, *From Popular Enlightenment to Lifelong Learning: A History of Adult Education in Scotland 1707-2005* (Leicester: NIACE, 2006).

⁴ Malcolm Chase, review of Mark Freeman, *The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust: A Study in Quaker Philanthropy and Adult Education 1904-1954* (York: William Sessions, 2004), *Northern History*, 42 (2005): 379.

Marxism', and hence focused on the 'workers' education movement'.⁵ This article considers religious adult schools, which formed one of the largest voluntary movements in the history of adult education in Britain, but is rarely discussed in any depth in the historiography of adult education, although the movement has produced its own internal histories.⁶ Although there have been a number of article-length studies of individual adult schools,⁷ this article is based on surviving records of a number of institutions. These include adult schools in Luton, Bedfordshire; Leiston, Suffolk; and South Wigston in Leicester; and also county-level adult school organisations in Yorkshire and Leicestershire. There is a range of adult school material in record offices throughout England,⁸ which is only sampled here. The dispersal of material relating to adult schools may be another reason for their relative neglect within mainstream historiography; certainly, there remains considerable scope for further studies of the movement, especially at local and regional levels.

This article concentrates on the interwar period, when adult schools contracted significantly in number and size, another development which has contributed to the historiographical marginalisation of the movement. The first intention here is to qualify, to some extent, the picture of decline in this period, by showing that, although overall membership of adult schools fell, the extent and timing of this fall varied considerably by region and gender. Moreover, the National Adult School Union (NASU) was probably the largest voluntary adult education provider on the eve of the Second World War. Nevertheless, the decline of the movement needs to be explained, and this article will consider some of the explanations that have been put forward for it. In particular, three issues will be considered: the philanthropic origins and internal structure of the movement; the availability of other social and educational activities in the interwar period; and the impact of decline on the culture of the adult school movement. Despite recent challenges to the analytical framework, it is difficult to avoid the issue of secularisation, and this article will draw on the secularisation paradigm to explain aspects of the history of interwar adult schools.⁹ Alan Gilbert has argued that, in response to secularising pressures, religious groups can either pursue a strategy of 'accommodation', or one of 'resistance'.¹⁰ This article will argue that the adult school movement in the interwar period provides a good example of a process of resistance to secularisation. As shrinking religious organisations, the adult schools

⁵ John Field, "'Spiritual Values in Adult Education" (1925) by Basil A. Yeaxlee', in *Wegweisende Werke zur Erwachsenenbildung*, ed. Ralf Koerrenz, Elisabeth Meilhammer and Käthe Schneider (Jena: Paideia, 2007): 287.

⁶ J. Wilhelm Rowntree and Henry Bryan Binns, *A History of the Adult School Movement* (Nottingham: Department of Adult Education, University of Nottingham, [1985; 1st ed. 1903]); G. Currie Martin, *The Adult School Movement: Its Origin and Development* (London: National Adult School Union, 1924); W. Arnold Hall, *The Adult School Movement in the Twentieth Century* (Nottingham: Department of Adult Education, University of Nottingham, [1985]). The most thorough discussion of adult schools in a general history of adult education is in J. F. C. Harrison, *Learning and Living 1790-1960: A Study in the History of the English Adult Education Movement* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), which is discussed below. There are only occasional references in Fieldhouse and associates, *History of Modern British Adult Education*.

⁷ See for example Thomas Kelly, 'An Early Lancashire Adult School', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 110 (1959 for 1958): 128-47.

⁸ The National Register of Archives lists holdings for 33 adult schools and related organisations, and this certainly fails to capture many of the available sources. There is less material in Wales and Scotland, where the adult school movement was comparatively weak.

⁹ Nash, 'Reconnecting Religion'.

¹⁰ Alan D. Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain: A History of the Secularization of Modern Society* (London: Longmans, 1980): 102-4.

drew stronger loyalties from those who remained within them, and adhered more closely to their formal religious practices.

The growth and decline of adult schools

The first adult school was established – in Nottingham – in 1798, and there were a number of active schools in the 1810s and 1820s,¹¹ but the origins of the twentieth-century movement lay in the Nonconformist revival of the second half of the nineteenth century, when members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) in several British cities established Sunday morning schools to instruct the working-class population in reading, writing and Bible study.¹² It was also hoped that the students might be attracted into membership of the Society of Friends. The Friends First-Day Schools Association (FFDSA) was established in 1847, initially to organise the work of Quaker Sunday schools for children, but became increasingly dominated by adult schools. Adult schools run under Quaker auspices in York from 1848, Birmingham from 1857, Bristol from 1859, Leicester from 1861, and Huddersfield and Luton from 1862.¹³ The main constituency consisted of fairly young men, mostly from unskilled or semi-skilled working-class backgrounds, most of whom did not remain in the schools for very long. A small sample of male York adult scholars from the late 1850s and early 1860s shows that the average time spent in the school was just over a year, but nearly 40 per cent were in the school for six months or less.¹⁴ Women's adult schools also emerged in the later nineteenth century. There are fewer good attendance records for these schools, but the patterns of attendance appear to be much the same, although the membership was somewhat older than in the men's schools. Of a small sample of members of one women's adult school in Leicestershire in the late 1890s, over 70 per cent were either married or widowed.¹⁵ Although there was a handful of mixed schools in the Edwardian period (46 out of a total of 1,929 in 1911), the majority of adult schools continued to be run on a single-sex basis in the interwar period. Of the 1,162 schools in 1937, 409 were men's and 495 were women's schools.

The later nineteenth century saw a consolidation of the regional and national organisation of the adult school movement. County unions of adult schools were established: for example, the Birmingham Adult School Union in 1884 and the Leicestershire Adult School Union (LASU) in 1889. The National Council of Adult School Unions was formed in 1899, and renamed the NASU in 1914. In the 1890s, the movement was failing to live up to the aspirations of its Quaker founders: many adult scholars were joining other Nonconformist denominations or failing to join a church at all, which can perhaps be partly attributed to the traditional Quaker reluctance to proselytise. Many schools were now joining the formally non-denominational county unions instead of the FFDSA, although Quakers still played a dominant role in the movement.¹⁶ Members of other denominations were increasingly starting adult schools: a notable example was in Leicestershire, where the rapid

¹¹ Thomas Pole, *A History of the Origin and Progress of Adult Schools* (Bristol: McDowell and Richardson, 1814).

¹² See Rowntree and Binns, *History*.

¹³ Martin, *Adult School Movement*: 81-3.

¹⁴ Attendance register, 1856-61: York City Archives (YCA), Acc.118/2; see Harrison, *Learning and Living*: 201.

¹⁵ Women's adult school, list of scholars, 1896-9: Leicestershire and Rutland Record Office (LRRO), 19D62/27.

¹⁶ Christopher Charlton, 'Introduction', in Rowntree and Binns, *History*: xxvii-xxviii.

growth of the movement was largely the result of the work of non-Friends.¹⁷ Following the introduction of compulsory elementary education in 1870 (1872 in Scotland), adult literacy levels had improved by the 1890s, and one of the main reasons for the establishment of adult schools had been undermined. As a result, the religious element of the schools, rather than reading and writing, was increasingly emphasised, and many introduced a new period of study known as the 'First Half Hour', in which a range of instruction was given, often in the form of a mini-sermon touching on some area of contemporaneous interest.¹⁸ Although most adult schools continued to meet in Quaker or other Nonconformist meeting houses, or in modest rented rooms, some acquired larger premises during the 1890s and 1900s, and expanded the range of activities undertaken under their auspices. Some established evening institutes at which social events were held, often in association with local temperance movements, while others ran savings banks, clothing clubs, and so on. As one Quaker explained in 1917, '[e]very real Adult School gathers other activities around it ... Savings Fund, Libraries, Temperance Societies, Sick Clubs, and the like'.¹⁹ Others expanded the educational programme, moving from Sunday mornings only to an 'All-the-Week' programme of activities, sometimes with a secular dimension. Meanwhile, the movement grew, as table 1 shows: membership of NASU-affiliated schools peaked at 113,789 in 1910.

The numerical strength of adult schools fell away considerably after 1910, a fact which dominated the internal discussions of the NASU for much of the next three decades. The First World War, unsurprisingly, had a negative impact on the number and membership of schools, but table 1 shows that the decline set in before 1914. Membership remained fairly steady in the 1920s, before undergoing another sharp fall in the following decade. The early 1920s saw a concerted attempt, directed from the centre, to start a 'Forward Movement' in the adult schools, which encouraged the development of 'All-the-Week' activities, Sunday evening meetings and more mixed schools. There was considerable optimism in the early post-war years about the future of the adult schools, which were mentioned favourably in the 1919 Ministry of Reconstruction *Adult Education Report*, and which were represented on the Board of Education adult education committee in the 1920s.²⁰ However, in the long term the results of the 'Forward Movement' were disappointing for the leaders of the NASU, and the adult schools failed to keep pace with the growth of other adult education providers. Most notable among these were the WEA, university tutorial classes and the Educational Settlements Association (ESA); both the WEA and ESA became 'responsible bodies' eligible for Board funding under the adult education regulations of 1924, while the NASU chose to maintain its independence from this stream of financial support.²¹ The ESA's settlements, many of which emerged from the adult school movement, provided a wide programme of educational activities in some towns and cities, and it was widely believed – by contemporaries and some historians – that the educational settlements drew students and leaders away from the older movement.²² In terms of crude numbers, recorded membership of the NASU fell from

¹⁷ Rowntree and Binns, *History*: 54-60.

¹⁸ Hall, *Adult School Movement*: 21-2.

¹⁹ Edward Grubb, *What is Quakerism? An Exposition of the Leading Principles and Practices of the Society of Friends, as Based on the Experiences of 'The Inward Light'* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1917): 176-7.

²⁰ Hall, *Adult School Movement*: 41, 74, 85.

²¹ Kelly, *History*: 268.

²² Hall, *Adult School Movement*: 74.

51,917 in 1924 to 33,301 in 1937, a fall of 36 per cent. The fall from 1910 to 1937 was 71 per cent.

There are, however, a number of reasons to qualify this rather bleak picture of decline, which is more complex than the crude figures suggest. First, even numerical decline does not mean that adult schools were unimportant in this period, and that their history should be neglected. As table 1 shows, there were 33,301 members in 1937; for comparison, whereas attendance at WEA classes, in Mary Stocks's words, 'flourished' in the interwar years, *membership* of the Association was below 29,000 on the eve of the Second World War. Indeed, Stocks recalled that, in the interwar period, the WEA itself passed through 'dangerous years', facing 'competing influences' in adult education which included the adult school movement.²³ Although, as this article will show, the extent of competition between the two movements was limited, their relative sizes emphasise the continuing importance of adult schools in this period.

Second, as the annual reports of the NASU often commented, there was a steady flow of new adult schools in the 1920s, and even in the 1930s. Although the overall number of schools fell in the interwar period, this overall fall masked a very large turnover of schools in some areas, reflecting the efforts of the NASU's 'Forward Movement' and the active involvement of certain individuals in planting new adult school 'seeds'. Although many of these new schools did not last very long, they resulted from a vitality within parts of the adult school movement that is not reflected in the national statistics. For example, between June 1924 and December 1928 a total of 341 new adult schools opened their doors, some of them in areas previously untouched by the movement.²⁴

A third reason to qualify the picture of decline is the considerable differences by region and by gender, especially the latter. In some county unions membership and the total number of schools were comparatively stable between the early 1920s and mid-1930s. Measurement is often difficult because of changing boundaries of union jurisdiction, but it is clear that the speed of decline varied considerably. Thus, for example, while the total membership of the NASU fell by 26 per cent between 1921 and 1934, London Adult School Union membership fell by only 12 per cent in the same period, while in South Wales and Monmouthshire it increased by 33 per cent, from 338 to 451, and the north-eastern adult schools also experienced a slight increase, from 1,538 members in the Tees-Side and Tyne and Wearside unions, to 1,838 in the new North-Eastern and South Durham unions.²⁵ More important, both nationally and in most county unions the decline was much sharper among men. It is surprising that little attention has been paid, for example in W. Arnold Hall's internally produced history of the twentieth-century adult school movement, to the stark gender differences in adult school membership in this period. As Mark K. Smith has pointed out, and as table 1 confirms, female membership fell much less quickly in the period 1911-37, and whereas men in the movement outnumbered women by almost two to one in 1911, the reverse was true on the eve of the Second World

²³ Mary Stocks, *The Workers' Educational Association: The First Fifty Years* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1953): 105-6, 118.

²⁴ Hall, *Adult School Movement*: 96.

²⁵ These figures are calculated from the *Adult School Year-Book and Directory*, 1922-3: 12-13, and 1934-5: 18-19. There is an incomplete set of the *Year-Book and Directory* in the British Library, P.P.2482.vg.

War.²⁶ These differences can also be seen at the level of the county unions. As table 2 shows, in Leicestershire between 1921 and 1937, while men's membership fell by 38 per cent, women's fell by just 12 per cent, and the number of women's schools increased from 41 to 42, while men's schools fell from 60 to 50. In Yorkshire, men's membership fell in the same period by 74 per cent, while the women's fall was 51 per cent. Even in the very small unions, the fall was greater among men: in Sussex men's membership dropped from 68 to 24 (a fall of 65 per cent), whereas women's declined from 190 to 110 (42 per cent). For many interwar women, adult schools continued to exercise a powerful appeal; indeed, one leader felt that women saved it from 'crisis' in the interwar period.²⁷

Despite these qualifications, it is clear that the adult school movement as a whole – and among both sexes – did decline in the interwar period, and historians have put forward various explanations for this. These can be grouped into four reasons first identified by J. F. C. Harrison in 1961, and also by some contemporaneous observers of adult schools as well as more recent historians.²⁸ First, Harrison argued that the adult schools, by the interwar period, were felt to embody an outdated form of social patronage, which was inappropriate in a society where identities were increasingly based on class. Adult schools could not 'avoid the appearance of Victorian philanthropy', and were too closely wedded to 'Victorian social shibboleths', reflecting the circumstances of their establishment and the social position of their nineteenth-century Quaker founders. Similarly, other Victorian philanthropic foundations, such as the university settlement movement, struggled to redefine their places in the social landscape of the interwar period.²⁹ Second, and perhaps related to this, Harrison identified a loss of spontaneity as the adult school movement aged, and a consequent decline in the power of the 'voluntary spirit'. Although adult schools continued to involve amateur teachers or leaders, rather than the professionals who were increasingly working for other providers, by the interwar period the leadership was ageing, and the movement was failing to draw in new recruits. As other histories of adult schools have shown, the NASU had a recurrent sense of crisis about 'leadership', and this will be discussed further in this article.³⁰

A third reason identified by Harrison for the decline of adult schools was 'a lack of fairly clear-cut aims': the demands, on the one hand, of providing an educational programme of contemporaneous relevance, and, on the other, of maintaining a religious but non-denominational outlook, made it difficult for the adult schools to present a clear sense of purpose. Hall's history of the movement repeatedly echoes this theme: the NASU was continually veering between educational and religious priorities, and did not manage to carve out the distinctive religious niche within adult education that it might have done.³¹ This judgement echoes the scathing verdict reached in 1938 by W. E. Williams, secretary of the British Institute of Adult Education and editor of the WEA journal *Highway*, who characterised the adult schools as 'a movement which has fallen between the two stools of evangelism and education and which for all its merits is as incapable of surviving the pressure of

²⁶ Mark K. Smith, 'Adult Schools and the Making of Adult Education', *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, www.infed.org/lifelonglearning/adult_schools.htm [10 September 2009].

²⁷ Ernest Champness, *Adult Schools: A Study in Pioneering* (Wallington: Religious Education Press, 1941): 67.

²⁸ Harrison, *Learning and Living*: 308-11.

²⁹ See Kate Bradley, *Poverty, Philanthropy and the State: Charities and the Working Classes in London 1918-1979* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

³⁰ Hall, *Adult School Movement*: 65, 144-5 and *passim*.

³¹ *Ibid.*: 69-72.

modern educational needs as the magic lantern is of competing against the cinema'.³² Although the idea of 'fellowship' in education drew all parts of the movement together, this idea itself was ill-defined. The religious stance of adult schools was itself deliberately broad, and it was felt that too explicit a statement of aims would compromise the movement's catholicity.³³ There was an unofficial 'statement of aims', put together in the early 1920s and used in many schools, but this was never formally adopted, and, as Harrison remarked, '[t]he traditional Quaker distrust of creeds and formal statements of aim as being attempts to place human verbal limitations on the freedom of the Divine spirit, worked against precise (and, it was felt, cramping) definitions of objectives.'³⁴

However, the fourth and, for Harrison and most other historians, the most important reason for the decline of the adult schools was not the incoherence of their religious message, but the religious associations themselves, which were increasingly out of step with the educational demands of the period. Thomas Kelly, for example, argued that the emergence of alternative provision, and the growth of secular humanist dominance of the adult education landscape, increasingly restricted the space available for the adult school movement to exert the religious influence on education that had become its *raison d'être*. Kelly attributed the earlier rapid expansion of adult schools to greater curricular diversity, 'a conscious effort' to retain pupils, and the growth of a 'spirit of fellowship' as well as the development of 'subsidiary activities' under adult school auspices, particularly in the 1890s and 1900s.³⁵ However, he explained, the interwar period saw 'a general trend towards a broad, undifferentiated form of adult education, inspired mainly by the desire for personal culture, and dominated by the humane tradition of the universities'.³⁶ In this context, and in the political circumstances of the 1930s, the adult school movement seemed anachronistic: one contemporary recalled, bluntly, that 'most unemployed miners did not want religion'.³⁷ More generally, a secularised demand for adult education, which was partly met by state-funded providers after 1924, restricted the scope for the adult school movement. As Harrison argued, in the context of a secularised demand for adult education, the claim made in one item of adult school publicity, which asserted that 'religion is education raised to its highest power', was more likely to alienate potential recruits than to attract them.³⁸

The remainder of this article will examine the interwar adult schools in the light of these four proposed reasons for their decline. Some support can be found for all four, but it will be argued here that the adult schools met with some success in combining religion and education, and while they certainly failed to maintain their numerical strength, particularly among men, it can be argued that they were comparatively successful as a religious movement. Adult scholars did not flock *en masse* to alternative adult education providers, but the schools clearly failed to attract new generations of leaders and students, whose attentions were turned elsewhere, often to secular activities. Table 3 shows that the decline of adult school membership, although precipitate when compared with their peak in 1910, when considered against

³² W. E. Williams, 'The Educational Settlements: A Report Prepared for the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust', October 1938: 114; Borthwick Institute for Archives (BIA), University of York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation Historical Archives (JRFHA), JRCT93/IV/2.

³³ Champness, *Adult Schools*: 31.

³⁴ Harrison, *Learning and Living*: 305; Hall, *Adult School Movement*: 55-6. See below: 000-00.

³⁵ Kelly, *History*: 202-3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*: 286.

³⁷ Champness, *Adult Schools*: 48.

³⁸ Quoted in Harrison, *Learning and Living*: 306.

the figure for 1901 was commensurate with the decline of other ancillary religious activities such as Sunday schools. Alan Wilkinson has argued that the growth of alternative leisure opportunities in the interwar period provided serious competition for Sunday morning educational activities, which was less likely to be faced by midweek providers.³⁹ Adult schools largely failed to sustain the 'All-the-Week' activities that could have assisted their longer-term survival as an educational movement, and as a result they failed to compete with secular attractions. The way they responded to these developments was to concentrate on their core religious activities, and as a result their experience fits well into the 'resistance' model of responses to secularisation.

Social attitudes and the 'voluntary spirit'

Harrison felt that adult schools were hampered by their association with Victorian philanthropy, and this judgment echoes some that were made at the time. W. E. Williams described the 'mildly-musty aroma of an Adult School ... the vestige of Quaker mysticism, or the echo of the traditional ... or the paternalism of some good Samaritan who created in some desolate area the first local habitation of adult learning and never let it pass out of his hands'.⁴⁰ The links of many schools to the Society of Friends highlighted class-restrictive social attitudes that belied the ideals of fellowship and freedom of religious inquiry that were foregrounded in the movement's propaganda.⁴¹ Brian Phillips views the adult schools as the 'working class constituency' of Quakerism, and sees the inability, or unwillingness, of Quakers to draw more adult scholars into the Society itself as a failure of the early twentieth-century 'Quaker renaissance'.⁴² Despite the democratic pretensions of the adult schools, and the use of the Nonconformist language of 'self-government' to describe their workings, the extent of self-government in some places was highly questionable. Moreover, the movement's own literature betrays traces of social judgmentalism that were poorly calculated to attract a working-class 'constituency' to the movement. In a county supplement to the adult school magazine *One and All*, published in 1945, one writer remarked: 'Adult Schools have the opportunity of teaching the working classes how to live and spend their leisure ... The working classes wasted too much time on football coupons ... The last war taught girls to smoke. This war has taught them to drink.'⁴³ Working-class readers of *One and All* were not likely to respond positively to comments such as this.

Another way in which adult schools can be seen to have epitomised a Victorian philanthropic tradition – which Harrison did not discuss – was in the role of home visiting within the movement. Before 1914 many adult schools were sustained by a system of home visiting, based on detailed attendance registers and the willingness of teachers, and perhaps other adult scholars, to visit absent members in their own homes. The minutes of almost all local adult schools contain repeated references to the visiting committee; and attendance was enforced with considerable

³⁹ Alan Wilkinson, *Dissent or Conform? War, Peace and the English Churches 1900-1945* (London: SCM Press, 1986): 62.

⁴⁰ Williams, 'Educational Settlements': 41.

⁴¹ Although members of other denominations ran adult schools, the Quaker influence remained profound. See Champness, *Adult Schools*: 21-4.

⁴² Brian Phillips, 'Friendly Patriotism: British Quakerism and the Imperial Nation 1890-1910' (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1989): 336.

⁴³ G.R.W., 'Recollections', *One and All*, Leicestershire supplement, n.s. 165, May 1945: LRRO, DE6759/5.

rigour, which probably contributed to the high turnover of members during the Victorian and Edwardian period. In 1890, the Luton Adult School introduced a 'much-debated Rule, that any Scholar not making four attendances in a quarter without giving a satisfactory reason for his or her absence shall be struck off the list' of members.⁴⁴ At the women's school in Luton, from the 1860s onwards, teachers visited the members in their homes, and according to the annual report, 'the practice has done much to maintain the kindly feeling which exists between the teachers and the taught'; at the end of the decade, 'beneficial results' were also obtained from visiting at the men's school.⁴⁵ Similar arrangements were made at Leiston Adult School in Suffolk, which was established in 1873.⁴⁶ A number of historians have seen home visiting of adult scholars as a stimulus to increased interest among philanthropists in the problem of working-class poverty in the late Victorian period. One example was Seebohm Rowntree, who traced the origins of his lifelong interest in social research to visiting his adult students' homes.⁴⁷

The widespread use of home visiting in the adult school movement reflected the centrality of the practice to Victorian religious and social life. Frank Prochaska has recently asserted that the visiting of working-class homes under church and chapel auspices 'bolstered that network of relations between the classes which contributed to Britain's high degree of self government and social order in the nineteenth century'.⁴⁸ The practice and vocabulary of district visiting were ubiquitous: Prochaska estimates that there were some 200,000 district visitors in a British population of around 36 million on the eve of the First World War.⁴⁹ At Leiston, the minutes of the men's adult school referred to members of the visiting committee as 'district visitors', and even in this small town there were numbered visiting districts, with visitors assigned to each.⁵⁰ The tradition of district visiting persisted into the interwar years in Britain, particularly in the Church of England, but it was in decline after the First World War, and was coming under strain even before this. Within the adult school movement, there was a sustained attempt to maintain the culture of visiting into the interwar period and even beyond: in a handbook for adult schools dating from the mid-1940s, members were advised to visit those who were ill or 'lonely'.⁵¹ In Leiston, by the late 1920s, a 'Sick Visiting' sub-committee was appointed annually, and sometimes arrangements were made at committee meetings to visit absent scholars.⁵² However, it was becoming increasingly clear – at Leiston and, doubtless, elsewhere – that the adult school could not be sustained by a network of visiting. In any case, as will be shown below, attendance among members was becoming more regular during the interwar period, as the adult school movement was shrinking to comprise an

⁴⁴ Souvenir of the jubilee of Luton Adult School, 1862-1912: 20: Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service (BLARS), X563/63.

⁴⁵ Luton Adult School, third annual report, year ending 31 March 1865, and seventh annual report, year ending 31 March 1869, both in minute book: BLARS, X563/1.

⁴⁶ Leiston Men's Adult School, minute book, 2 September 1874, 6 April 1876: Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich (SRO(I)), FK6/10/1.

⁴⁷ Rufus M. Jones, *The Later Periods of Quakerism* (2 vols, London: Macmillan, 1921), 2: 956-8; David Owen, *English Philanthropy 1660-1960* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1964): 436; Freeman, *Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust*: 16, 73.

⁴⁸ Frank Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain: The Disinherited Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): 63.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*: 65-6.

⁵⁰ See Leiston Men's Adult School, minute book, 4 November 1884, and subsequent meetings.

⁵¹ Will Lamb, *A Manual for Adult School Members* (London: NASU, [1945-6?]): 10: LRRO, DE6759/7.

⁵² Leiston Men's Adult School, minute book, 27 January 1930, 31 August 1927: SRO(I), FK6/10/5.

increasingly committed core of regular members. While the Christian duty of visiting the sick was still carried out, the declining appeal of wider philanthropic visiting was paralleled in the adult school movement. For example, the interwar minutes of South Wigston Men's Adult School in Leicester contain no reference to visiting at all.⁵³

One theme that recurs in almost all local adult school records for this period is the sometimes difficult relationships between the schools and the county unions and NASU, which in some respects undermined the 'voluntary spirit'. There is clear evidence of a lack of harmony between the different tiers of the movement. Disunity centred on two issues: the curriculum and finance. The publication of the first adult school *Lesson Handbook* in 1911 was a watershed for the movement, although the FFDSA had issued lessons 'for many years' before this, and a survey in 1888 showed that a third of the schools were using them.⁵⁴ According to Arnold Hall more than 90 per cent of adult schools were using the *Lesson Handbook* in the mid-1920s, but it was considered an 'obstacle to progress' by some, and it may be no coincidence that it was first issued just as the movement peaked in numbers, although its largest sale was 25,000 in 1925.⁵⁵ There was considerable unease at a local level about the perceived prescriptiveness of the *Lesson Handbook*, particularly as it was felt to be pitched rather too high for some schools. The secretary's report to the council of the Yorkshire Adult School Union (YASU) in 1923 referred to 'an encouraging determination [in Yorkshire] to make the most a lesson handbook which was admittedly difficult'.⁵⁶ The previous year, the Union had heard an address on 'The Union Handbook, and How Best to Use It'.⁵⁷ One adult school leader admitted in 1941 that 'it is an ideal – rarely reached – that every member should have read through the lesson notes and well pondered them prior to the meeting'.⁵⁸ Although only around 1,600 words each, the lessons could be difficult to follow; they also contained suggestions for further reading, to which most adult scholars were unlikely to have easy access, although some schools – for example, in Luton – maintained their own libraries.⁵⁹ Kent Adult School Union complained to the NASU in 1928 that the handbooks were too complicated, prompting more fears of 'disunity' within the movement.⁶⁰ Having said this, in some places the lack of experienced leaders meant that use of the handbook was unavoidable: in Leicestershire in 1921, the county union was concerned that 'the smaller schools are suffering badly from lack of leadership on any subject apart from the Lesson Handbook', and the handbook sold well as the LASU bookstall.⁶¹ The wide circulation of the NASU newsletter *One and All* also helped to centralise and direct the work of the movement, and almost all schools used the *Fellowship Hymn Book*, which was first produced in 1909, and sold half a million

⁵³ South Wigston Men's Adult School, minute book, 1923-58: LRRO, DE6759/1.

⁵⁴ Martin, *Adult School Movement*: 113-14.

⁵⁵ Hall, *Adult School Movement*: 4, 74-5, 81.

⁵⁶ YASU, secretary's report to council, February 1923, in minute book: 42: Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, Carlton Hill Archive, TT60.3.

⁵⁷ *Yorkshire Post*, 25 September 1922: cutting in YASU minute book: 13.

⁵⁸ Champness, *Adult Schools*: 60.

⁵⁹ Luton Friends' Adult School library issued 4,350 books in the year ending 31 March 1871: annual report, 1871: BLARS, X563/1.

⁶⁰ Hall, *Adult School Movement*: 99.

⁶¹ Leicestershire Adult School Union (LASU), annual report, 1921: 11; 1916: 11. The reports are in LRRO, 19D62/1-23.

copies within five years; this hymn book was also used by the 'Brotherhood' movement and the Co-operative Holidays Association.⁶²

The second area of contention between centre and locality related to finance. The NASU was poorly funded, often relying on grants from charitable bodies to support the employment of its paid officials.⁶³ The county unions themselves were often in difficulty. In 1909, the LASU asked all members to contribute a farthing a month for twelve months, to help clear off its debts, but even this modest proposal provoked an unenthusiastic local response.⁶⁴ Two years earlier, the LASU had changed its affiliation fee, from 2s.6d. per school per year, to 1d. per member per year, which appears to have resulted, unsurprisingly, in the schools returning lower membership numbers.⁶⁵ Another ruse, adopted in 1922, saw the LASU encourage its schools to order copies of *One and All*, not according to the number of members who actually wanted it, but on the basis of one-copy-per-member, paying the bill from school funds.⁶⁶ Some LASU member schools were reluctant to pay their fees to the county union and to the NASU.⁶⁷ Similar concerns arose in other counties: for example, at Leiston in 1921, 'other financial demands' prevented the men's adult school from contributing to an appeal from the 'Forward Movement', and in the same year the school felt unable to send a delegate to a meeting of the Essex and Suffolk union because of financial constraints.⁶⁸ These difficulties continued into the late 1920s: when the Leiston school was told by the county union that its contributions were not 'up to requirements', its committee retorted by complaining about the high cost of the *Lesson Handbook*, suggesting that the notes for each lesson could be shortened.⁶⁹ There were also difficulties in Yorkshire. In the 1920s and 1930s the YASU was having trouble collecting the money owed to it by its member schools. Some members in 1930 openly questioned the role of the YASU and NASU, and what they did with the money; as a result the YASU issued a document entitled 'A Plain Talk to Our School Treasurers and Others', which emphasised the importance of paying subscriptions.⁷⁰ The insistence of the movement's leaders that the NASU was 'an advisory rather than a governing body' was probably unconvincing to many.⁷¹ The 'voluntary spirit' was compromised by centralisation of the structure and curriculum of the adult schools. It is not clear to what extent this contributed to the decline of the membership, but seems to have had a detrimental effect in some places.

Adult schools and other educational and social movements

The most compelling reasons adduced for the decline of the adult schools are the failure to respond to a secularised demand for adult education, and the failure to

⁶² Hall, *Adult School Movement*: 15; Mark Freeman, 'Fellowship, Service and the "Spirit of Adventure": The Religious Society of Friends and the Outdoors Movement in Britain c.1900-1939', *Quaker Studies* 13 (2009): 000-00.

⁶³ Freeman, *Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust*: 128-9, 174, 204.

⁶⁴ LASU, annual report, 1909: 17.

⁶⁵ LASU, *Pioneering in Education: The Story of the Adult School Movement in Leicestershire* (Leicester: LASU, 1948-9): section 3: LRRO, 19D62/40.

⁶⁶ LASU, annual report, 1922: 13.

⁶⁷ South Wigston Men's Adult School, minutes, 13 April 1938; Leicester Friends' Women's Adult School, minutes, 21 March 1909, 7 June 1909: LRRO, 19D62/28.

⁶⁸ Leiston Men's Adult School, minutes, 10 January 1921, 3 November 1921.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 12 June 1928.

⁷⁰ 'Rowntree Records – York Adult Schools': YCA, Acc.379.

⁷¹ Ernest Dodgshun, *The Adult School Way* (London: NASU, n.d.): 4: LRRO, DE6759/6.

articulate a clear set of aims. There is considerable force behind both explanations, but both can be qualified to a certain extent. There is a lack of evidence for the suggestion that other, secular providers were taking students away from the adult schools. Undoubtedly, WEA and university tutorial class provision grew in the interwar period, at the same time at which adult school membership declined. Moreover, educational settlements, many of which originated from within the adult school movement, drew some leaders away from the adult schools, and in many cases offered a more attractive range of classes. Hall argued that educational settlements offered the ‘All-the-Week’ programme that was encouraged by the ‘Forward Movement’, and it has been argued elsewhere that the settlements, unlike adult schools, were able to diversify their curriculum to meet contemporaneous needs.⁷² However, educational settlements existed only in some places – for example, there was none in Birmingham or Leicestershire – and even where they did exist, their comparatively small membership does not suggest a wholesale move of students away from adult schools to the new institutions. Moreover, most educational settlements themselves housed adult schools, usually in better premises than had been available previously.⁷³ The ESA was keen to retain its relationship with the adult school movement, even as the curricula in its own settlements became more secularised and distant from these institutions’ own adult school origins.⁷⁴

Similarly, although the WEA and university extramural provision expanded in this period, and although the NASU did affiliate to the WEA,⁷⁵ it is doubtful whether the adult schools addressed the same constituency as these providers of more formal education. In an interview after the Second World War, Arnold Hall, general secretary of the NASU, admitted that adult schools ‘do not attract the student type’.⁷⁶ For example, in Leicestershire, repeated attempts were made in the 1910s and 1920s to organise courses under the joint auspices of the LASU and WEA, but these occasioned repeated disappointment owing to the lack of interest taken by adult school members. In 1920, a Board of Education grant was obtained for a joint tutorial class, but few adult scholars attended. A joint summer school in 1921 was poorly attended ‘from our side’, as the LASU reported, while in the same year a three-year tutorial class, again with Board recognition, offered by the LASU in collaboration with the extra-mural department at University College Nottingham, met with an apathetic response from adult scholars, which did ‘not augur well’ for this kind of class.⁷⁷ This last experience may have convinced Robert Peers, professor of adult education at Nottingham, that the adult school movement was not really an educational movement at all: he claimed that it ‘professes to be an educational movement, and it will find its true purpose when it becomes so in effect’.⁷⁸ One joint

⁷² Hall, *Adult School Movement*: 42-3; Mark Freeman, ‘The Magic Lantern and the Cinema: Adult Schools, Educational Settlements and Secularisation in Britain c.1900-1950’, *Quaker Studies* 11 (2007): 192-203.

⁷³ On educational settlements, see Mark Freeman, ‘“No Finer School than a Settlement”: The Development of the Educational Settlement Movement’, *History of Education* 31 (2002): 245-62.

⁷⁴ On settlement curricula, see Freeman, *Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust*: 129-30. Even in 1947, a declared objective of the ESA, now known as the Educational Centres Association (ECA), was to maintain relations with other organisations, explicitly including the NASU: *The Educational Centres Association* (London: Educational Centres Association, 1947). There is a copy in the Institution of Education, London, ECA archive, box 144.

⁷⁵ ESA executive minutes, 29-30 December 1928, minute 1051: ECA archive, box 142.

⁷⁶ G. R. Lavers, aide-memoire of meeting with Arnold Hall, 8 October 1952: BIA, B. Seebohm Rowntree papers, SLN/2/3.

⁷⁷ LASU, annual reports: 1916: 11-12; 1918: 14; 1920: 14; 1921: 10-11.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Hall, *Adult School Movement*: 71.

venture with the WEA in Leicestershire – another summer school – was poorly attended by LASU members because it clashed with their annual outing to Cromer.⁷⁹ This example is arguably evidence of poor planning more than anything else, but it does epitomise the priorities of adult school members: they were more interested in fellowship than in structured learning, and therefore would rather participate in an excursion than in a summer school. The kind of courses that involved written work and certification were not what they wanted, and some adult school leaders agreed, arguing against Peers that more formal educational goals might compromise the religious underpinnings of the movement. It is notable that one of the successful ventures undertaken by the adult school movement was the establishment of holiday guest houses, which provided opportunities to obtain the kind of the fellowship that was the principal objective of the movement.⁸⁰ Adult schools ran co-operative endeavours with the Holiday Fellowship, which also involved a number of Quakers. These collaborations met with considerable success, and encouraged county unions to establish their own guest houses.⁸¹

Although adult school members were probably not, in most cases, leaving the movement to take up alternative educational opportunities, it was certainly true that adult schools were finding it difficult to attract the younger members that had joined them in the 1890s and 1900s. Whereas a high turnover of members had been maintained in the Edwardian period, it was increasingly acknowledged – for example, by the Luton Adult School in 1933 – that while old members were leaving ‘for various reasons’, it was becoming more difficult to replace them.⁸² The next generation was not joining the adult schools, a tendency that the NASU tried in vain to counteract by rebranding its ‘junior adult schools’ (of which the membership had peaked at more than 5,000 during the First World War) as ‘young people’s schools’ in the late 1920s, and opening them to all aged 16 to 30. This did not work: in some unions, the decline in ‘young people’s’ membership was even more rapid than among the men’s and women’s schools.⁸³ Table 3 shows that this decline was paralleled in Sunday schools attached to the churches. Although, as the table makes clear, Christian denominations did not decline significantly in membership – Doreen Rosman has described the interwar years as ‘a period when churches were full and congregations vigorous’⁸⁴ – but ancillary activities definitely declined. This could possibly be accounted for by the attractiveness of alternative educational opportunities, but the explanation seems unlikely given that WEA, settlement and university extension courses did not run on Sunday mornings. By contrast, the adult schools, after the brief and patchy flowering of ‘All-the-Week’ activities in the Edwardian period, tended to concentrate their activities into a two-hour period, often very early on a Sunday morning. Alan Wilkinson has suggested that Nonconformity suffered more than the established church in the interwar period from the competition of secular leisure activities because Sunday services in Anglican parishes were often earlier than the 10.30 or 11.00 am services that remained common in the Free Churches, and therefore Church of England members were more easily able to do something with their

⁷⁹ LASU, annual report, 1920: 14.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*: 79-80.

⁸¹ Freeman, “‘Fellowship’”. On the Holiday Fellowship see T. A. Leonard, *Adventures in Holiday-Making, Being the Story of the Rise and Development of a People’s Holiday Movement* (London: Holiday Fellowship, 1934).

⁸² Luton Adult School, annual report, 1933: 1.

⁸³ Champness, *Adult Schools*: 66. See the annual reports of the NASU for the membership figures.

⁸⁴ Doreen Rosman, *The Evolution of the English Churches 1500-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 306.

Sundays after worship was over.⁸⁵ This problem did not apply to the adult schools, however, which met very early on Sunday mornings, partly to allow members to attend other places of worship if they wished.⁸⁶

Perhaps the main competition faced by the adult schools – and by other elements of what Callum G. Brown has called the ‘outer constituency’ of the Christian churches⁸⁷ – the increasing availability of a wider range of leisure opportunities during the interwar period. Some of this was under nominally educational auspices – for example, the London County Council evening institutes, which provided for a range of social activities, games and hobbies⁸⁸ – but much of it was not. Space does not permit a detailed discussion of the expansion of leisure provision in British towns and cities in the interwar period, but its importance can be seen, for example, in Seebohm Rowntree’s second poverty survey of York, carried out in 1936, where by far the longest chapter was devoted to leisure pursuits.⁸⁹ The hostility of many churches to some popular leisure activities during the interwar period probably undermined the attractiveness of organisations such as adult schools that were associated with religious institutions.⁹⁰ Importantly, the expansion of leisure provision not only undermined the attractions of adult schools for potential students, but also drew potential leaders away from the movement. Of particular importance, towards the end of the period, was the emergence of community centres and associations in the late 1930s, particularly on new housing estates, where the NASU had tried, and largely failed, to make inroads.⁹¹ These new institutions enjoyed better premises than adult schools – they were eligible for state funding under legislation of 1937 – and avoided both religion and, usually, education, while at the same time offering scope for less outwardly paternalistic community activity on the part of the socially concerned middle-class population.

Leadership was very important in the adult school movement, and was continually discussed – usually in a very concerned tone – in the movement’s literature. The supply of ‘suitable leaders and teachers’ was considered the ‘most pressing’ problem facing the adult schools as early as 1922.⁹² It is notable that, in the areas where adult schools did spread during the interwar period, there were active paid workers on the ground helping to promote them. In Yorkshire, for example, adult schools were started under the auspices of the Yorkshire 1905 Committee, a ‘ginger group’ established by Yorkshire Quarterly Meeting of the Society of Friends to promote ‘Quaker extension’ in the county.⁹³ In Tyne and Wear, and subsequently in

⁸⁵ Wilkinson, *Dissent or Conform?*: 59.

⁸⁶ *Yorkshire Post*, 25 September 1922: see note 56 above.

⁸⁷ Callum G. Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2006): 4.

⁸⁸ W. A. Devereux, *Adult Education in Inner London 1870-1980* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1982): 67-76, 120-46. Devereux comments in particular on the strength of the ‘corporate life’ of the LCC institutes (136-7).

⁸⁹ B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty and Progress: A Second Social Survey of York* (London: Macmillan, 1941). See also Andrzej Olechnowicz, ‘Unemployed Workers, “Enforced Leisure” and Education for “the Right Use of Leisure” in Britain in the 1930s’, *Labour History Review* 70 (2005): 27-52.

⁹⁰ Andrzej Olechnowicz, *Working-Class Housing in England between the Wars: The Becontree Estate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997): 194

⁹¹ *Ibid.*: 141-5, 188-93; Freeman, *Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust*: 123-9.

⁹² *The Friend*, 13 October 1922: 698. There is a complete set of the *The Friend* in the Library of the Society of Friends (LSF), London.

⁹³ Thomas C. Kennedy, *British Quakerism 1860-1920: The Transformation of a Religious Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 289; Mark Freeman, *Quaker Extension c.1905-1930: The Yorkshire 1905 Committee* (York: Borthwick Institute, 2008).

the Midlands, schools were formed through the agency of the ‘campaigner’ Albert Carter, who used motor transport in his efforts to extend the movement.⁹⁴ The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust ‘liberated’ a number of key individuals for service to the adult school movement.⁹⁵ Across the country, there are many examples of local leaders who spent many decades in the adult school movement, beginning in the 1890s or 1900s. At the South Wigston Men’s Adult School, which opened in 1902, ‘Brother’ R. Kind was the first secretary, and then served three separate terms as president, totalling 16 years, between 1911 and 1937; meanwhile, ‘Brother’ Sam Brewin was secretary from 1909 to 1932, and another ‘Brother’ was treasurer for 19 years.⁹⁶ The importance of leadership, in which members of the Society of Friends still took a leading role, can be seen by comparing the density of membership of the NASU and the Society of Friends. Because adult school unions and Society of Friends Quarterly Meetings were not co-extensive, it is not possible to provide exact statistics for this; however, it is notable that in the Quaker strongholds of Bedfordshire, Bristol and Birmingham, adult schools remained relatively strong into the 1930s, whereas where Quakerism was particularly weak – for example, in Lancashire, Cheshire, Essex, Suffolk and, especially, Scotland – adult schools were thin on the ground.⁹⁷ The most important exception was Leicestershire, where Quakerism was comparatively weak, but adult schools were stronger than anywhere else. However, Quaker leadership was undoubtedly a vital part of adult schools in many areas of Britain, and there was no doubt that it was becoming more difficult to attract Quakers into the movement in the 1920s and 1930s, and this was often blamed on alternative ways of spending leisure time. One Quaker adult school teacher, John S. Hoyland, remarked somewhat caustically in 1930 that the younger generation of Friends felt ‘little desire to share in philanthropic activity’: he despaired that ‘a motor-picnic in the country [was] felt to be more conducive to spiritual welfare than attendance at public worship’.⁹⁸

Hoyland’s dismissive complaint did not do justice to the earnestness of the generation of Quakers – and members of other denominations – to which it referred. There was clearly a move away from adult schools among the post-war generation.⁹⁹ However, they were not withdrawing from organised public life; rather, they were becoming involved in different spheres of social action, some of which took them beyond the traditional concerns of Quakerism. One particularly important outlet for interwar Quaker energies was the Youth Hostels Association, which involved many Friends at local and national levels.¹⁰⁰ Organised youth movements, such as Woodcraft and even the Boy Scouts, also attracted leaders from the Society of Friends.¹⁰¹ Similarly, Helen McCarthy has recently pointed to the religious inspiration

⁹⁴ Hall, *Adult School Movement*: 75-6, 85-6, 104.

⁹⁵ Freeman, *Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust*: 116-18 128-9, 204-5.

⁹⁶ South Wigston Adult School, opening ceremony souvenir programme, 3 October 1936: LRRO, DE6759/2.

⁹⁷ Membership of the Society of Friends is charted annually in the ‘tabular statement’, printed in the Yearly Meeting Proceedings. There is a complete set in the LSF.

⁹⁸ John S. Hoyland, ‘The Present Need of the Society of Friends’, *Friends Quarterly Examiner* 64 (1930): 44-5.

⁹⁹ Charlton, ‘Introduction’: xlii.

¹⁰⁰ See *The Friend*, *The Friend*, 14 April 1933: 314, 11 August 1950: 602-3.

¹⁰¹ See Mark Freeman, ‘Muscular Quakerism? The Society of Friends and Youth Organisations in Britain c.1900-1950’, *English Historical Review* 125 (forthcoming, 2010).

of interwar youth movements such as Toc H.¹⁰² Some organisations – such as the Holiday Fellowship – were associated with the adult school movement, and, more significantly, others had emerged from the movement itself. The First World War, and the extension of the peace movement, played a particularly crucial role. The Council for the Study of International Relations (CSIR), established during the war, was an outgrowth of the adult school movement: it was initiated by Arnold Rowntree, honorary secretary of the NASU, following an interview with Lord Bryce published in the adult school journal *One and All*.¹⁰³ The Council had some 500 study circles under its auspices in 1916, and although it did not survive the war, its activities were taken over by the League of Nations Society, which in turn became part of the League of Nations Union (LNU) in 1918.¹⁰⁴ Organised pacifism, and the liberal internationalism promoted by the LNU, flourished during the interwar period, and absorbed the energies of many of those who might otherwise have led adult schools. For example, Ernest Champness, a Surrey adult school leader and later NASU president, considered the LNU to be one of the most significant competitors of the adult school movement.¹⁰⁵ Significantly, the use of the study circle by groups such as the LNU and CSIR reflected the influence of adult school methods. Quakers and other Nonconformists used study circles widely within their own denominations, and adult school methods were not dissimilar. The study circle, which emerged from Scandinavia in the 1890s, was popular within Nonconformist denominations in Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century and clearly influenced the practices of adult schools; study circles were widely adopted across both religious and secular arms of the peace movement, as well as by feminist and other educational organisations in the interwar period.¹⁰⁶ In sum, although their methods were influential in some respects, adult schools undoubtedly suffered from the growth of what McCarthy has called ‘new kinds of civic organization, often secular in character, strongly invested in a discourse of active citizenship, and committed to creating and defending a space within associational life which was free of partisan or sectarian conflict’.¹⁰⁷

Adult schools as a religious movement

The result of these developments was that adult schools were fewer in number, and smaller, than before, although there were some regional variations. Table 2 showed that the decline was regionally uneven, and greater among men than among women, and table 4 shows, for the same county unions and the NASU as a whole, that adult schools became smaller during the interwar period. Sussex provides an exception here, but here there were very few adult schools by 1937, as table 2 makes clear. The second point to emerge from table 4 is that the average attendance, as a proportion of total members, was increasing in most unions and in the NASU as a whole. (The tendency was a little less marked in the case of Leicestershire.) Attendance figures by

¹⁰² Helen McCarthy, ‘Parties, Voluntary Associations and Democratic Politics in Interwar Britain’, *Historical Journal* 50 (2007): 896.

¹⁰³ Martin, *Adult School Movement*: 191, 343.

¹⁰⁴ See McCarthy, ‘Parties’: 896-7; Freeman, *Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust*: 52-3.

¹⁰⁵ Champness, *Adult Schools*: 68.

¹⁰⁶ Tom Steele, *Knowledge Is Power! The Rise and Fall of Popular Educational Movements 1848-1939* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007): 188-90; Freeman, *Quaker Extension*: 18-21; Valerie Wright, ‘Education for Active Citizenship: Women’s Organisations in Interwar Scotland’, *History of Education* 38 (2009): 426-7.

¹⁰⁷ McCarthy, ‘Parties’: 892.

sex are not available after 1924.¹⁰⁸ Local examples show how these wider trends were experienced at the level of the individual school. Members tended to be older – in the case of men, considerably so – than those who had attended in the Edwardian period, and there was a much lower turnover of members.¹⁰⁹ This reduced turnover ensured that women’s adult schools – where, traditionally, members tended to be older and periods of membership longer – declined more slowly than the men’s. By the early 1950s, Arnold Hall could explain that most adult scholars were lower middle-class women in their fifties.¹¹⁰ However, the basic pattern of decline was similar at men’s and women’s schools. The very full attendance registers for the men’s adult school at Leiston permit the impact of these changes to be discerned at a local level. Table 5 shows the attendance patterns there from 1922 to 1939. A dwindling membership resulted in a very small core of members remaining in the school by the late 1930s, but with an increasing propensity to attend: the school committee’s minutes recorded in 1930 that, following a perusal of the attendance registers, ‘members [were] found to be attending fairly regularly, but attendance is low’.¹¹¹ (A falling-off of average attendance as a percentage of members was experienced in 1938 and 1939: the reasons for this are not entirely clear, but table 4 shows that this also occurred in Leicestershire and the home counties from 1937.) Most of these individuals had been in the adult school for many years, and most participated beyond simply attending meetings. In 1930, of the nine members who attended on more than 25 occasions, seven served on the committee of the school in some capacity.¹¹² The women’s school registers in Leiston were less well kept, but a similar pattern can be discerned here, although the decline in membership was slower and the attendance patterns somewhat more erratic.¹¹³ It is possible that a larger peripheral membership at the women’s school can be explained by a stronger culture of home visiting among the female population of Leiston, but the minute books for the women’s school, which might have shed light on this, have not survived. In any case, it seems clear that a committed core of members survived in the adult schools in the 1930s, attracted by the religious fellowship on offer within the movement, and therefore more likely to attend.

This is a key point: the religious focus of the schools, which had been diluted in some places by the attempts to develop an ‘All-the-Week’ programme, and by secular uses of the ‘First Half-Hour’, was becoming more intense in the 1930s. This may have alienated some potential recruits to the movement, but it strengthened the allegiance of those who were already within it. As early as 1924, the NASU’s historian George Currie Martin suggested that one possible future for the adult schools could lie in the establishment of what would, effectively, be a new Christian denomination. This would, he conceded, probably involve some decline in numbers,

¹⁰⁸ In that year, at a national level, attendance at men’s schools was 61 per cent of members, and at women’s school 63 per cent. In some unions, the discrepancy was higher than this, for example in Sussex, where 64 per cent of male adult school members attended on an average Sunday, compared with 70 per cent of women members. In Leicestershire, the figures were 65 and 69 per cent; however, in the Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire union, men’s attendance was higher than women’s.

¹⁰⁹ Significantly, when Ernest Champness described a typical adult school meeting in 1941, he described the ‘president’ as ‘an elderly man, who is a member of the Society of Friends’. Champness, *Adult Schools*: 59.

¹¹⁰ Lavers, aide-memoire of meeting with Arnold Hall.

¹¹¹ Leiston Men’s Adult School, minutes, 1 October 1930.

¹¹² Leiston Men’s Adult School, minutes, 27 January 1930; attendance register for 1930: SRO(I), FK6/10/7.

¹¹³ Leiston Women’s Adult School attendance registers: SRO(I), FK6/10/11-12.

but would not involve abandoning the distinctive tenets of the movement.¹¹⁴ Thus, in contrast to Robert Peers, Martin and some others felt that, rather than become an educational organisation in the mould of the ESA or even the WEA – which, as we have seen, did not necessarily hold many attractions for adult scholars – the NASU and its members should focus on what was most distinctive about their movement, that is, its religious dimension. Although a new denomination was not in fact established – indeed, in some parts of Britain, where new adult schools were created to serve large unemployed populations, the religious side of the work was temporarily sidelined¹¹⁵ – some aspects of adult school life in the 1930s can be seen as reflecting a shift from educational organisation to religious movement. For reasons discussed above, the imposition of a formal creed onto the adult schools would have been anathema to the Quaker origins of the movement and to the spirit of free religious inquiry that was promoted. However, the NASU secretary Arnold Hall remembered in 1985 that ‘[o]nly a generation ago one might have heard an elderly Adult School member, who was not otherwise connected, remark that the Adult School was his or her “church”.’¹¹⁶ Even former members, Ernest Champness suggested, might see the adult school as a ‘spiritual home’.¹¹⁷

An example of this can be found at the South Wigston Men’s Adult School in Leicester, where, as noted above, the title ‘Brother’ was used among the members, reflecting the close links that existed in some places between adult schools and the ‘Brotherhood’ movement.¹¹⁸ The school at South Wigston, like many others, was struggling to keep its numbers up during the interwar period. It had an attached social institute, but by 1929 this was ‘not being patronised so well’, despite the committee’s efforts to provide entertainments such as card games and table-tennis. The institute closed in 1930. Whist drives took place at the school from time to time, but these were stopped in 1938.¹¹⁹ However, the religious life of the school continued to flourish, and new premises were opened in 1936.¹²⁰ In 1929 the school purchased 50 copies of the *Fellowship Hymn Book* for use at its meetings, while committee meetings invariably opened and closed with prayer. The programme declared that ‘A Hearty Welcome is extended to all men who seek Comradeship, Friendship and Fellowship’.¹²¹ Along with other adult schools, South Wigston printed the unofficial creed of the movement, a statement of ‘Nine Aims’ that had been formulated in or around 1921. This reflected clearly the centrality of the religious message of the movement:

1. To make and develop men and women and to teach them the art of life.
2. To study the Bible frankly, freely, reverently, and without prejudice.
3. To establish an unsectarian basis for Christian effort and unity.
4. To bring together in helpful comradeship and active service the different classes of society.
5. To stimulate and educate public spirit and public morality.
6. To teach the responsibility of citizenship.
7. To encourage whatever makes for International Brotherhood.

¹¹⁴ Martin, *Adult School Movement*: 389-92.

¹¹⁵ Champness, *Adult Schools*: 48-9.

¹¹⁶ Hall, *Adult School Movement*: 166.

¹¹⁷ Champness, *Adult Schools*: 60.

¹¹⁸ ‘Brotherhood’ evolved from the Pleasant Sunday Afternoon movement: see Charlton, ‘Introduction’: liv-lxii; Martin, *Adult School Movement*: 122.

¹¹⁹ South Wigston Men’s Adult School, minute book, 6 September 1929, 8 November 1929, 11 July 1930, 24 August 1930, n.d. [Sept. 1938].

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4 April 1929; opening ceremony souvenir programme, 1936.

¹²¹ South Wigston Men’s Adult School programme, n.d. [1930s]: LRRO, DE6759/3.

8. To advance as far as may be the equality of opportunity [*sic*].
9. To help men and women to understand and to live the life of Jesus Christ, and to encourage them in their personal allegiance to Him.¹²²

Instead of following a policy of adaptation to changed educational needs – as, for example, most educational settlements did in this period by abandoning most of their religious teaching¹²³ – the adult schools resisted secularising pressures by continuing to emphasise the distinctively Christian elements of their work. This was increasingly recognised by the leaders of the movement. Writing after the Second World War, the movement’s leading evangelist Gwen Porteous emphasised the ‘spiritual ideal’ behind adult schools. Although she acknowledged the value of disinterested inquiry and ‘objective study’, she also felt that the movement should not be afraid to ‘affirm’: ‘There may be occasions when, driven by the Spirit, it will be compelled to publish abroad a truth which it holds and believes to be urgent and timely.’¹²⁴ The relationship between education and religion was often remarked upon during the interwar period, informed by an understanding of the role that adult schools played within existing structures of organised religion. For Horace Fleming, warden of the pioneering Beechcroft educational settlement, writing in 1926, the adult school was the first in a number of stages within education, in which ‘the individual self is thawed out from the ice block of instincts, prejudices and habits of the mass’. The final stage was the Quaker meeting for worship, ‘where the individual self [feels] the need for expansion into the worship of the highest’.¹²⁵ Although few adult scholars reached this final stage – the adult schools remained a poor recruiting ground for the Society of Friends – many continued to find their desire for religious fellowship met in the adult school movement in the late 1930s. This feature of adult schools emerges clearly in a description of a typical meeting, in an unnamed location, written by Ernest Champness in 1941: here, the school started with a hymn from the *Fellowship Hymn Book* and a period of Quakerly silence followed by another hymn; then came the ‘lesson’, which consisted of a discussion of a passage from the *Lesson Handbook* which asked students ‘[t]o consider our relationships to those of other races according to the mind of Jesus’; finally, there was a third hymn and a collection, and then a prayer to conclude the meeting.¹²⁶ Insofar as the adult schools continued to provide opportunities for religious education and ‘fellowship’, they had not, in W. E. Williams’s words, ‘fallen between the stools of evangelism and education’, but had managed with some success to merge the two. If they had failed in many other ways, they had at least succeeded in this: as Porteous explained, right from the start the adult schools had been ‘both religious and educational’.¹²⁷

By the 1930s, there could be no doubt that the adult school movement was in decline, and this was recognised both nationally and locally. At Leiston in 1931, the men’s school minuted ‘the need for increasing our membership’; and at a national level repeated investigations into the numerical decline of the NASU.¹²⁸ However,

¹²² South Wigston Men’s Adult School, opening ceremony souvenir programme, 1936. This statement is also reprinted in Hall, *Adult School Movement*: 55-6. See 000-00 above.

¹²³ Freeman, ‘Magic Lantern’.

¹²⁴ Gwen Porteous, *Adult School Education in the New Age* (London: NASU, [1948]): 2-3.

¹²⁵ Horace Fleming, ‘Interim Report on the Society of Friends etc.’ (1928): 33. BIA, JRFHA JRCT93/VI/1(e).

¹²⁶ Champness, *Adult Schools*: 59-64.

¹²⁷ Porteous, *Adult School Education*: 7.

¹²⁸ Leiston Men’s Adult School, minutes, 13 January 1931; Hall, *Adult School Movement*: 95, 109-10, 128-9.

some schools were beginning to accept their reduced size, and to express the view that size did not matter as much as the quality of the fellowship that was on offer in the movement. In Leicestershire by 1922, according to the LASU's official historian, the movement 'was much smaller in number of members and schools, yet there was still alive the spirit of adventure and initiative which had characterised the Movement in the more settled days before 1914'.¹²⁹ In Yorkshire in 1923, the secretary of the YASU noted the falling numbers on the rolls, but suggested that these were unreliable, and 'therefore fell back upon his general impressions of the state of the union, from which a more hopeful outlook was forthcoming. There was a vigour of thought & purpose, [and] a widespread desire to enlarge the range of interests'.¹³⁰ In Luton, the adult school's annual report for 1933 described a falling membership of almost 10 per cent on the year, but still expressed the optimistic hope 'that all the members have gained in spiritual stature and have profited by the fellowship and exchange of thought which it has been our privilege to enjoy'.¹³¹ Comments such as this – and examples could be multiplied – emphasise the usefulness of the 'resistance' model: these adult schools accepted their declining influence, but insisted on their importance to their own members, and the quality of what they did within a reduced sphere. The schools were still providing a useful service to their declining, and not always negligible, constituency.

Conclusion

The adult school movement remains neglected within the historiography of adult education, despite the availability of a large but dispersed body of archival material. Many aspects of the movement, at a national and local level, remain almost untouched by historians. The size and influence of adult schools, particularly during the late nineteenth-century Nonconformist revival but also in the period of decline that has been surveyed in this article, justifies a wider and deeper exploration of their history, in both educational and religious contexts. In particular, the evidence presented in this article suggests that a more systematic study of attendance registers might shed useful light on the growth and decline of adult schools, and particularly the gender dimensions of the movement, which certainly require more analysis. Moreover, it is clear from what has been presented here that many of the themes that arise in consideration of other educational movements – conflicts between central organisation and localities, relationships with other providers, and the importance of individuals and small groups of committed leaders – also emerge from an examination of the adult schools. Most obviously, the importance of the religious dimension is highlighted, and this in turn raises questions about the impact of secularisation and the possible responses to it. It has been argued here that, while the adult school movement can certainly be seen as a victim of secularising pressures in the interwar period, it retained a significant presence within adult education until the Second World War, in a period when the growth of alternative leisure opportunities and voluntary organisations made it more difficult for an overtly religious educational organisation to maintain its strength and influence. Whereas the educational settlements, for example, followed a strategy of 'accommodation' and adapted their curricula and practices to meet emerging demands,¹³² the adult school movement concentrated on

¹²⁹ LASU, *Pioneering in Education*: section 4.

¹³⁰ YASU, secretary's report to council, February 1923.

¹³¹ Luton Friends' Adult School, annual report, 1933: 1.

¹³² Freeman, 'Magic Lantern'.

its religious functions, and followed a strategy of resistance. This involved a change of emphasis rather than a wholesale change in practice; the failure of the 'Forward Movement' encouraged a concentration on Sunday morning activities and an abandonment of the ambitious 'All-the-Week' programme. The kinds of leisure activities that were made available at adult school social institutes were available elsewhere; adult schools did not need to provide them. What they did continue to provide was an opportunity for relatively informal religious worship and discussion of religious issues in an atmosphere of 'fellowship' – a word that continued to pervade the rhetoric of the movement throughout the interwar period. In this respect, they became more akin to a small Christian denomination, not unlike the Society of Friends from which they first emerged and from which they were often still led. As with most Christian denominations, women outnumbered men.¹³³ The NASU was a shrinking movement, and an ageing one. However, its adult schools continued to serve a cohort of older, but committed members, and on the eve of the Second World War, there were more adult scholars than Quakers, and more members of the NASU than of the WEA. Adult schools, therefore, still played an important part in the history of religion and education during the interwar period.

¹³³ 'Throughout the twentieth century ... there was a significantly higher level of religious practice and belief amongst women compared to men': Brown, *Religion and Society*: 30.

Table 1: Membership of adult schools affiliated to the National Adult School Union, selected years, 1901-1937

	(a) Total number of schools	(b) Total number of members	(c) Number of men's schools	(d) Members of men's schools	(e) Number of women's schools	(f) Members of women's schools
1901	400*	45,000*	--	--	--	--
1905	700*	60,000*	--	--	--	--
1910	1,818	113,789	1,156	--	622	--
1911	1,929	110,686	1,200	69,087	683	39,205
1914	1,955	91,751	1,146	54,786	740	36,965
1916	1,783	72,736	1,006	41,222	711	30,514
1921	1,409	50,761	759	28,412	539	22,349
1924	1,395	51,917	721	27,660	555	24,257
1928	1,397	48,166	587	18,309	528	21,719
1931	1,313	41,775	513	14,248	509	20,043
1934	1,221	37,625	462	11,859	492	18,683
1937	1,162	33,301	409	9,631	495	17,687

Source, for 1901, 1905 and 1910: Hall, *Adult School Movement*: 212-13. Source for other years: *Adult School Year-Book and Directory*, 1911, 1914, 1916-17, 1922-3, 1924-5, 1928-9, 1931-2, 1934-5, 1937-8: British Library, P.P.2482.vg. From 1914, the exact date of the survey is given, and this date is used in this table: for example, the date reported in the *Year-Book and Directory* for 1922-23 was 31 December 1921.

* The figures for 1901, 1905 and 1910 are approximations only, based on Hall, *Adult School Movement*: 212-13. Hall does not break the membership down by sex, although he does give figures for the number of men's and women's schools in 1910. The figures in columns (c) and (e) do not sum to those in column (a), and the figures in columns (d) and (f) do not sum to those in column (b), because of the presence of 'junior', mixed and 'young people's' schools.

Table 2: Adult schools in selected county unions, with percentage decline in membership, 1921-1937

	Leicestershire				Beds, Bucks and Herts (includes Cambs from 1928)				Yorkshire				Sussex			
	Number of men's schools	Members of men's schools	Number of women's schools	Members of women's schools	Number of men's schools	Members of men's schools	Number of women's schools	Members of women's schools	Number of men's schools	Members of men's schools	Number of women's schools	Members of women's schools	Number of men's schools	Members of men's schools	Number of women's schools	Members of women's schools
1921	60	2,134	41	1,418	17	620	21	952	112	4,295	91	3,407	4	68	4	190
1924	59	2,324	40	1,494	17	539	23	863	119	4,393	96	3,710	6	91	3	178
1928	60	2,035	41	1,576	13	344	20	694	95	2,421	88	2,755	3	25	3	147
1931	57	1,866	41	1,592	11	309	21	711	85	1,878	85	2,366	4	35	3	136
1934	54	1,645	41	1,431	10	227	20	546	74	1,489	74	1,931	2	22	2	145
1937	50	1,323	42	1,249	10	190	19	508	65	1,108	69	1,679	1	24	2	110
% decline		38		12		69		47		74		51		65		42

Source: See table 1.

Table 3: Church, adult school and Sunday school statistics, selected years, 1901-1937

	Church of England ('000) ¹³⁴	Congregationalists (England)	Society of Friends	Adult school members	C of E Sunday scholars ('000)	Congreg. Sunday scholars	Prim. Meth. Sunday scholars
1901	1,945	258,434	17,476	45,000	2,333	687,012	460,763
1910	2,212	287,952	19,522	113,789	2,437	697,509	470,839
1914	2,226	289,545	19,942	91,751	2,350	662,798	453,430
1916	2,097	288,784	19,218	72,736	2,167	605,796	436,077
1921	2,214	--	19,071	50,761	1,994	--	419,245
1924	2,315	--	19,039	51,917	1,948	--	414,678
1928	2,339	290,208	19,065	48,166	1,829	541,210	386,412
1931	2,288	286,277	19,151	41,775	1,798	506,184	361,307
1934	2,319	280,446	19,279	37,625	1,715	470,213	--
1937	2,226	267,688	19,295	33,301	1,506	411,448	--
As a percentage of 1901 figure							
	Church of England	Congregationalists (England)	Society of Friends	Adult school members	C of E Sunday scholars	Congreg. Sunday scholars	Prim. Meth. Sunday scholars
1914	114	112	114	204	101	96	98
1916	108	112	110	162	93	88	95
1921	114	--	109	113	85	--	91
1924	119	--	109	115	83	--	90
1928	120	112	109	107	78	79	84
1931	118	111	110	93	77	74	78
1934	119	109	110	84	74	68	--
1937	114	104	110	74	65	60	--
As a percentage of 1910 figure							
1914	101	101	102	81	96	95	96
1916	95	100	98	64	89	87	93
1921	100	--	98	45	82	--	89
1924	105	--	98	46	80	--	88
1928	106	101	98	42	75	78	82
1931	103	99	98	37	74	73	77
1934	105	97	99	33	70	67	--
1937	101	93	99	29	62	59	--

Source: for adult school date, see table 1; for other data, Robert Currie, Alan Gilbert and Lee Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977): appendices.

¹³⁴ Easter Day communicants.

Table 4: Members per school and average attendance, selected years, NASU and selected county unions, 1911-1937

	Leicestershire		Beds, Bucks and Herts (includes Cambs from 1928)		Yorkshire		Sussex		All NASU-affiliated schools	
	Members per school	Attendance as % of membership	Members per school	Attendance as % of membership	Members per school	Attendance as % of membership	Members per school	Attendance as % of membership	Members per school	Attendance as % of membership
1911	62	--	54	--	57	--	28	--	57	--
1914	51	65	48	55	47	51	31	54	47	59
1916	76	62	39	52	39	50	32	51	41	57
1921	35	67	37	58	34	56	29	68	36	63
1924	39	67	31	60	34	57	27	68	37	62
1928	36	66	23	82	30	61	23	75	34	63
1931	35	71	30	63	26	62	20	78	32	65
1934	33	70	20	86	23	63	31	72	31	66
1937	28	67	24	64	21	62	26	78	29	67

Source: See table 1.

Table 5: Members and average attendance, Leiston Men's Adult School, 1922-1939

	Number of members	Average attendance	Attendance as % of membership
1922	49	18	37
1923	26	15	58
1924	24	13	54
1925	22	12	55
1926	22	12	55
1927	24	11	46
1928	21	11	52
1929	17	9	53
1930	14	8	57
1931	12	8	67
1932	14	8	57
1933	14	9	64
1934	14	9	64
1935	12	8	67
1936	11	7	64
1937	12	7	58
1938	13	6	46
1939	11	5	45

Source: Attendance registers: Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich, FK6/10/7.