

Introduction

This is the story of Eliza Lowe and the school that she ran with her sisters. It is, in parallel, the story of her influence upon the founding of the School of S. Mary and S. Anne, Abbots Bromley of which I was a pupil between 1959 and 1966. Over the years the name of the school changed. First, it was S. Anne's, then, S. Mary and S. Anne, later, Abbots Bromley School for Girls and, finally, Abbots Bromley School. In this book the name appears as is appropriate for the historical context.

A further note about nomenclature is necessary. It has become the norm in publications to use St rather than S. For example in the most recent book about Woodard by David Gibbs, published in 2011, St is used throughout. Copy-editors do not like inconsistencies. However the use of S. in relation to the school of S. Mary and S. Anne has persisted from its inception and old girls are rather particular about it. So I have retained this tradition throughout in relation to Woodard schools except when quoting others who use St.

Eliza Lowe was a remarkable woman, the second eldest of fourteen children who took on responsibility for her siblings after the death of her parents. Her youngest brother was Edward Clarke Lowe, born in 1823 when Eliza was 20 years old and already started upon her long teaching career. She saw to it that her brother was educated, going on to graduate from Oxford and to be ordained into the Church of England.

Edward Lowe became a close colleague of Nathaniel Woodard, who built public boarding schools for boys of the middle classes in Sussex and later in the Midlands. Lowe was headmaster of one of these schools for many years and Woodard's closest colleague. In 1874 Edward Lowe opened S. Anne's School in Abbots Bromley with eight girls and a vision to create six more girls' schools associated with Woodard. He did this on his own as Nathaniel Woodard was not in favour of public-school education for girls. The question arises therefore as to what led Lowe to differ from Woodard and found schools for girls.



To the glory of God,
in reverent and grateful remembrance
of **ENZA LOWE**,
at Seaforth in Lancashire,
and afterwards at Mayfield in Southgate
in the County of Middlesex,
for fifty years,
until on Aug. 9 1872 she rested from her labours,
the wise and loving teacher and friend of youth,
the Choir of this Chapel
is erected
as a fruit of her training
and a tribute to her worth
by many who cherish her memory,
in the hope
that the Worship of this Holy Place
may perpetuate in others
the piety she taught themselves to prize

†
Blessed are the dead which die to the Lord even so saith the Spirit
for they rest from their labours and their works do follow them.

*Fig. 1 (opposite) Memorial plaque to Eliza Lowe, 1803-72.
Photograph by Niki Gandy.*

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As stated in the Acknowledgements, I came across, quite by chance, an entry in Wikipedia for Edward Clarke Lowe which stated that he was born in Everton, Liverpool and educated by his sister who ran a school in Bootle and then Seaforth, suburbs of Liverpool, close to where I live. I began to wonder whether it was the fact that he owed his early education to his sister that influenced him to want to extend the Woodard tradition to girls.

What could I find out about Eliza Lowe and her school and would it reveal any clues as to why Lowe determined to found boarding schools for girls? To my surprise, and helped by a lot of people, I was able to track her life, her school and some of her pupils. Enough to write a book – and to suggest a strong link with Abbots Bromley School.

Shortly after I began my research the closure of the school was announced, in March 2019. This was a bitter blow to many, including me, and I wondered whether it was worth proceeding. I decided that it was perhaps more important now than ever that the history of Eliza be told. I had time to investigate the Guild archives and take important photographs in the chapel before the school closed in July that year. I carried on and this book is the result.

The book is divided into three parts. Part One explores the background to my story. Chapter 1 introduces the Woodard Community and is followed by a chapter on the education of girls in nineteenth century Britain. Both chapters are important in putting the story of Eliza in context and demonstrating the pioneering nature of Edward Lowe's vision. Part Two introduces Eliza Lowe. Chapters 3 to 9 tell her story and that of some of her pupils up till her death in 1872. Chapter 10 considers letters written by Eliza and Chapter 11 looks at the events surrounding the creation of S. Anne's and how the inspiration of Eliza lay behind Lowe's endeavour. Part Three is a reflection on the relevance of my story today.

Eliza's story can only be told in fragments, yet these fragments bear witness to a remarkable lady. Apart from the six letters that have survived I have found no photographs, no books, only one early curriculum outline and few direct references to her work. However, the evidence I have found is compelling.

My eight-year-old grandson Charlie was very interested in the fact that his grandmother was writing a book. I told him that it was non-fiction. Then I began to wonder. I had told him I was writing a story and stories are fiction. All I can say is that I have tried hard to stick to the facts but there is interpretation here too and I have become enamoured of Eliza which introduces a further element of subjectivity.

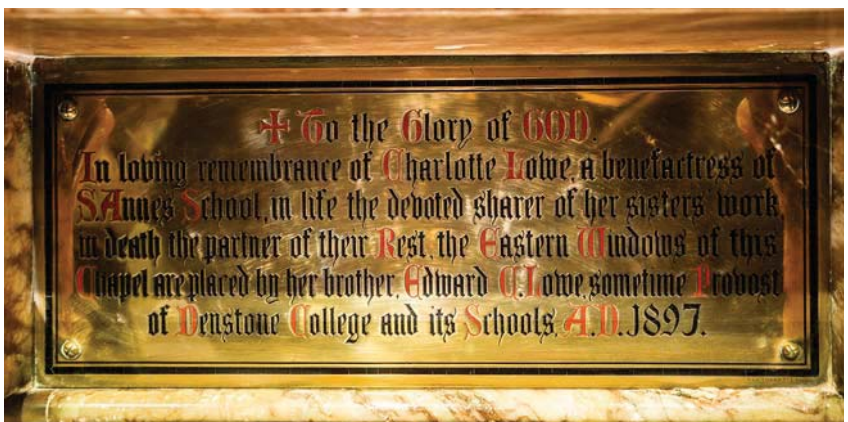
The first and most important clue to her life is a plaque mounted prominently in the chancel of the chapel of Abbots Bromley School, a plaque which is by far the largest. The plaque is of high quality. It must have seemed an expensive item at a time when her brother was working hard to raise the funds to pay for the chapel and other school buildings. Nevertheless, the plaque to Eliza clearly mattered to Edward Lowe and it had to be impressive.

The plaque is situated on the north side at eye level jutting out from the wall of the sanctuary with a dramatic brass canopy above it. The canopy supports seven candle holders forming what resembles a crown. As can be seen from the photograph below, it forms the border or edge of the Sanctuary and is very close to the altar. Immediately opposite is an identical canopy above a cupboard and piscina for the use of the priest, the cupboard serving as an aumbry where the Blessed Sacrament may be reserved. The altar had to be the centre of attention and focus for those present but Edward Lowe could hardly have chosen a more prominent position for the plaque.

Fig. 1a (opposite) Memorial plaque in context. Photograph by Niki Gandy.

Fig. 1b (opposite) Memorial plaque to Mary Manley Lowe. Photograph by Niki Gandy.

Fig. 1c (opposite) Memorial plaque to Charlotte Lowe. Photograph by Niki Gandy.



Underneath the plaque to Eliza may be seen a smaller plaque. This plaque is a memorial to Mary Manley Lowe, Eliza's sister who died in 1874. As the plaque states Mary Manley worked with Eliza in her school throughout her life. The fine reredos was given in her memory by her surviving brothers and sisters.

Opposite, in a similar position under the piscina, is another plaque, this time to the youngest sister Charlotte who died in 1897. She too had worked all her life in Eliza's school. The Eastern windows of the Chapel in her memory were the gift of Edward Lowe.

In Lancing Chapel, a far grander affair, there are chantry chapels erected on either side of the altar, one to the memory of Nathaniel Woodard and one to his son Billy, who had managed the project for many years. The scale is different but the intention is the same. Honour the founders. It is surely significant that Edward Lowe chose to put these memorials to Eliza, Mary Manley and Charlotte in the sanctuary, either side of the altar.

So here in the beautiful chapel are clues to the lives of Eliza and her sisters and hints of their importance in the founding of the school in Abbots Bromley, a Woodard school, which was to give a Christian education to girls (and latterly boys) for nearly 150 years. In 1998 an illustrated booklet giving the history of the chapel was published.¹ It is a fine publication which describes each area of the chapel, and lists many of the memorials and donors of furnishings etc. However, there is no mention of the memorial to Eliza Lowe, nor of those to her sisters. Yet, according to Eliza's memorial plaque, the Choir of the Chapel, the first section to be built, was erected in her memory and as a 'fruit of her training'. This book is her previously un-told story. Surely a story worth telling.

1. Anna Wells and Muriel Roch, *S. Anne's Chapel, The School of S. Mary and S. Anne, Abbots Bromley, Staffordshire*, July 1998.