

Nurseries for Citizens

Phoebe's interest in education at every level was profound and enduring. 'I want young people to grow up to believe that the world is not a world of enemies but of friends, and that it is neither a law court nor a battleground but a home'. Her particular concern was for the smallest and the youngest:

It is a biological fact that the development of a living organism is strongly influenced by the conditions to which it is subject in the early stages of growth.... This is of supreme significance when related to the unfolding of human personality – a complex organism in which the physical, mental and spiritual elements are inextricably bound together and interdependent.

The repercussions of ignoring this fact were enormous. 'The trouble today, or so it seems to me, is that men and nations are not fully grown up; in international affairs particularly they act like immature adolescents', and, in an obvious allusion to Hitler, she suggested – a generation before Alice Miller – that the persecution of minorities was 'a reaction of a misguided toddlerhood'.

It is no surprise to find that Phoebe was an ardent advocate of the nursery school, then still a somewhat exotic creature, whose potential was widely perceived in terms of its benefits for the physical (and, just occasionally, psychological) development of children from the slums; but for Phoebe it was much more than that.

I believe that the greatest contribution of the Nursery School is that it is a training ground for democratic citizens...citizens who have learned, not what to think, but how to think.

Her zeal certainly owed something to her personal experience. Her mother had been running what was in effect a day-nursery for her brother and neighbours' children in the house at Body Road when she was born. 'You might have been born in a nursery school!', she was once told. 'As a

matter of fact, I was', she replied.

It wasn't enough to leave it all to mothers. 'It is only rarely that the needs of the whole child – physical, mental, spiritual – can adequately be met through the unaided effort of the mother in the home', she wrote, 'and in every strata of society there is need for something more scientific than maternal instinct and the limited experience of mother or nurse'.

Her interest in the nursery school movement was 'aroused and strengthened' by personal association with Margaret McMillan and other pioneers, such as Katherine Bruce Glasier. Phoebe was an active member of the Nursery School Association, formed in 1923, and soon became a member of the Executive Committee.

As early as October 1931 she offered her services to the NSA as Organising Secretary, but it was not until December 1933 that she was appointed. Money was a consideration – 'things are not too rosy financially', as she told Rabson whilst soliciting a reference – but only a small one, for the post was part-time and based in London, and she had to find her own commuting expenses from the princely salary of £250 a year. Her references glowed, of course. Edith Morley called her 'the most competent person I have ever met'.

It was a responsible job. 'I was, well, head of the organisation', as Phoebe later said, almost apologetically; and she turned the Nursery School Association into a high-profile national campaigning body.

She represented the NSA on various national organisations, produced pamphlets on all aspects of the movement and its work that 'deeply impressed' her peers, and travelled the land to address meetings and help organise new branches.

Her conviction shone through all her work. 'We are losing 50,000 children every year before the age of five, and nearly 100,000 of the survivors reach the elementary school in such a condition that they have to receive medical attention' she told a meeting in Plymouth in January 1936, which was fully reported in the *Western Morning News*. 'In the nursery schools the conditions are made to fit the child. The child is not made to fit the conditions. In many homes the child is almost a piece of furniture. The nursery school is one of the best means of educating mothers and fathers.'

She worked hard to correct the impression that nursery education was only really useful to correct the effects of deprivation. 'Interest in the Nursery School movement is growing not only as a remedy for unsatisfactory social and economic conditions,' she told the *Star* in a 1936 interview, 'but because parents of all classes are coming to realise that the first few years of a child's life are the vital ones. Very few homes can provide everything that is necessary for his healthy all-round development.' The nursery school provided

diversity, and other companions to learn with. 'The minds of the nursery children are never tied to the adult stake, but left free with no repression of spirits or coercion into right behaviour'.

Phoebe won the admiration of colleagues and rank-and-file alike. A member from Yorkshire wrote to praise 'the quiet efficient way you have of going on so thoroughly; so generously giving of *yourself*, your time and effort.

In her three years of office, the number of local branches increased from seven to nineteen, though Phoebe characteristically was more concerned at what had not been achieved. By 1936 there were only 79 schools in the whole country, with 5,520 children: 'It cannot be said that these figures represent a serious attempt to deal with the needs of the pre-school child'.

In October 1936 she handed in her notice. Albert, she explained, had been suffering from an illness that had proven to be 'longer and more exacting than I had anticipated'; and she wanted to find a job 'at a more adequate salary'. Her connection with the movement, however, remained as strong as ever.

Even before she had left the NSA, Phoebe had decided to write a book on the movement. In November 1936, at the suggestion of Edith Morley, Phoebe approached the publishing house of Routledge, who were keen on her idea. Writing was delayed by illness, but the text was finished by the end of 1937, and review copies were sent out in May 1938. 1,250 copies were printed, under the Kegan Paul Trench and Trubner imprint.

Although *The English Nursery School* begins by claiming to be the story of the pioneers, their achievements and their vision 'of what childhood might be and of the nobler race that might grow out of it', the book is not so much a history as a manifesto for the future; Phoebe's own version of the vision:

early training and exercise in self-reliance, unselfishness and willing co-operation which are features of the nursery school, will go far towards producing the kind of citizen so vitally necessary if democracy is to be capable of the tasks that devolve upon it – or even to survive.

The English Nursery School was meticulously researched. Local authorities, architects, educationalists and experts of all kinds supplied her with facts and plans, graphs, statistics and photographs, with which the book is peppered. It immediately became the standard work, and remained so for many years. (A revised edition, which Routledge hoped she might produce after the war, fell victim to Phoebe's massive workload).

The reviews were impressive. 'A book to possess for its inspiration, clarity and sanity...and for the joy of reading' (*Woman Teacher*) 'Easy, compact and authoritative' (*Time & Tide*) 'The author knows all there is to be known about her subject' (*Times Educational Supplement*).

To Phoebe, however, who always saw her work in terms of its utility, the comments that she probably appreciated most were those such as appeared in the *Listener*: 'it is perhaps the best testimonial to the writing that it produces in the reader the conviction that here is an idea of inestimable value and that the lag in its adoption is maddeningly stupid.'

Phoebe actively promoted the nursery school concept in her home town. As early as January 1930, Dr Hastings was promising Phoebe that he'd be pushing the cause of nursery education in Parliament, and contributed several articles to the *Citizen* with titles such as 'Rights for the Mites'.

She regularly, if unsuccessfully, urged the Council to take the subject seriously; and although she believed strongly that nursery schools should be independent entities, she worked closely with the architects of the new nursery classroom at Battle School in 1936: the designs were used as a model for other nursery classes in the town. In *The English Nursery School*, she claimed that the nursery class 'is exercising a beneficent influence upon the remainder of the infant school, permeating it with that spirit of freedom and spontaneity which is the special characteristic of the nursery school'. Perhaps she had Battle in mind.

In Reading as elsewhere, the real drive for nursery schools came from outside the Council. The Reading branch of the NSA had been set up in 1928, and had active links with Reading WEA, the University – and, crucially, the *Reading Standard*, whose proprietor, Walter Rivers, was an enthusiastic supporter. In February 1935, the *Standard* launched an appeal, and in April Rivers hosted a VIP luncheon at the Great Western Hotel.

The speaker was Nancy, Lady Astor, Britain's first female MP and, although a Conservative, a keen supporter of the nursery school movement. 'Start a Nursery School in Reading at once on the right basis', she exhorted. 'Show the country that Reading is up-to-date, go-ahead and as full of vision as any of the great towns in England'.

Rivers set the ball rolling with a donation of £250 then and there, but it took another two years before the first school buildings were completed, at the junction of Blagdon Road and Torrington Road on the new Whitley Estate. Lady Astor returned to the town to cut the ribbon: 'Reading is famous for its manufactures; let it be famous in the future for the production of perfect children'. The school itself – dubbed 'Reading's 'Sunshine Colony' – opened in January 1938, under the superintendance of Miss Deschampsneufs, who sensibly re-styled herself Miss Newfield. Demand was immediate: there were forty places, and by that October there was a waiting list of 140.

Phoebe's role in the local NSA was limited to advocacy on the Council and addressing the odd meeting; and although she supported such initiatives from whatever source, she had strong reservations about voluntary schools.

The English Nursery School concludes with a plea for the ending of voluntary schools, since they served as 'a loop-hole through which reluctant local authorities may escape from their responsibilities'. Reluctant Reading took over the Blagdon Road nursery in April 1939, but three years later she claimed that the Council had still 'turned a deaf ear' to the demand.

Ironically, in view of her pacifism, it was the War that brought the nursery school firmly into the mainstream, as a form of baby-sitting to free mothers to work for the war effort. Twelve 'war-time nurseries' were set up, two of which were funded by contributions from America.

As if her work on the Council and for the nursery school movement were not enough, Phoebe also became a magistrate.

'The spirit of modern legislation demands more than ever the co-operation of women in the administration of justice', she wrote soon after her appointment in 1931. The first women magistrates had been created in 1920, but at the time that Phoebe joined the Bench there were still only 400 female JPs in the whole country. Some areas had none at all, and even in those which had them there were 'rarely enough to ensure the presence of a woman at every sitting of the Court'.

Throughout the 1920s Phoebe and her Labour colleagues tried repeatedly to get more women nominated as magistrates, and particularly those 'of working-class sympathies'. Phoebe put her own name forward for nomination several times; and when she finally succeeded, Edith Sutton, who supported her nomination, wrote to her: 'The Chancellor has decided that only women of some experience in social service shall be appointed. May the day soon come when the same shall apply to the men!'

Phoebe, of course, was consistently 'liberal' in her views: not because she was 'soft' but because that was the only way in which she believed real justice could prevail. The average magistrate, she wrote, disliked 'the notion of fitting the punishment to the criminal rather than to the crime and...invariably shies at the mere mention of 'child guidance' or 'psychological treatment'.'

Yet, as she said, 'the virtual necessity in dealing with the young delinquent is to look beyond the actual offence to the cause, whether they be in the depths of the child's mind or in his environment, and having discovered them to decide how best to deal with them in the interests of the offender and of the community.' Factors such as bad housing conditions, unemployment and poor family background had to be considered: 'it is evident...that no magistrate can come to a just or wise decision without a knowledge of all the facts which have any bearing on a child's conduct'.

Phoebe was unimpressed with her colleagues on the Bench:

When I was first appointed to the Commission of the Peace one of my

colleagues, having congratulated me, said: 'I hope you will not prove the truth of the theory I have always held – that women are infinitely harder than men', while another, a retired general, said: 'Whatever you do, you must not allow your sympathy to make you too lenient'.

Before I had been on the Bench six months I discovered that the type of magistrate who prided himself on tempering justice with mercy was frequently neither just nor merciful. He who would 'let off' a youthful offender against whom a number of petty offences were recorded and whose environment was almost wholly responsible for the delinquency would, from the same motive of leniency, keep down the amount of an affiliation order to the lowest possible limit, irrespective of the needs of the mother and child, because 'if you make it too heavy you'll break the poor fellow's spirit'. There were those who could think of no better treatment than birching for a small boy of nine charged with a sexual offence but who, regretfully accepting the fact that birching was no longer in favour, suggested imposing a heavy fine on the boy's father.

Nor was it just her fellow-magistrates who came in for chastisement. When the Chief Constable claimed, as Chief Constables were wont to do, that a recent rise in juvenile delinquency was due to 'parental indulgence and child-spoiling legislation', she retorted brusquely that the increase owed more to bad example, poverty and 'the dreary outlook for the future' (this was in 1939).

She praised the work of the Home Office schools that encouraged 'the development of that self-discipline which is so much more efficacious than discipline imposed from without', although her fictionalised account of an ex-Borstal inmate, and 'his old friend the Probation Officer' somehow does not quite ring true:

He thought of the fresh air, wholesome food and regular routine of Borstal, where every hour was filled with interesting though strenuous occupation and where there were firm but kindly folk who were really concerned for one's welfare.

Phoebe was conscientious and thorough. She read up a lot on systems abroad, and wrote many articles about all aspects of her work. She visited Holloway Prison, and was appalled by 'the cold vastness of the pile of buildings that looms beyond the inner gateway... a sense of gloom and depression that will not be shaken off'.

In 1932, she wrote a forthright article for the *Birmingham Post* in which she condemned Holloway as 'a costly white elephant', wholeheartedly endorsed an official report that classed the (declining) number of women offenders 'rather as a nuisance than as a menace to society', and advocated closing the

gaol and transferring the inmates to open prisons, or even 'to a country house where...women offenders might receive training in useful occupations'

In the law, as in every other area of public life, Phoebe consistently pushed for greater involvement of women. She sang the praises of female probation officers and police-women, and lobbied the Lord Chancellor to get more women magistrates appointed to the Reading Bench.

Phoebe enjoyed her magistracy, although the sittings could be long and arduous and the work quite stressful; and she had a lot of sympathy with the people in the dock. 'I think a conscientious magistrate should say to him or herself 'there but for the grace of God go I' ', she told the press in 1962, when, at the age of 75, she had to retire ('she was very fed up about that', as one friend recalls).

When Phoebe resigned from the NSA, she applied for a variety of other jobs, including the editorship of *Home & Country*, the Women's Institute magazine. Although she promised to suppress her politics, it seems possible that she had hopes of using the magazine to radicalise a new section of the female population: after the War, she planned (but never delivered) a series of lectures for local WIs on such topics as 'Current Affairs from the Woman's Standpoint' and 'The Education Act and what to expect from it'.

Her application also reveals her enduring love of the countryside. 'Although circumstances compel me, at present, to live in a town, I prefer country life and country pursuits...we have a very large garden; we keep poultry and grow our own fruit and vegetables from which I make my own preserves and jellies'.

She did not get the job, however, but she continued with her journalism and, in 1939, produced a series of leaflets for the National Society of Day Nurseries. The financial situation at home seems to have improved, for in 1938 Albert took over financial responsibility for the *Citizen* from the Labour party.

The *Citizen's* readership had declined to 5,000, a quarter of its circulation fourteen years earlier; and the Labour party, according to Phoebe, had 'wanted to shut it down'. The Cusdens thereafter sustained a loss of over £30 per issue (which, by way of comparison, was equivalent to six week's wages for Phoebe at the NSA).

With help from his brother Archibald, a professional journalist, Albert increased the size with a view to eventually turning it into a Berkshire-wide weekly paper. Articles under the new *régime* included, in June 1938, a report on Huntley and Palmer's latest cheap labour initiative: importing women from South Wales, while local workers were put on short time. A Question in the House resulted, and it appeared that 120 Welsh women had indeed lost their benefit for refusing to take up work with H & P in Reading.

