A prosopographical study of early modern English schoolmasters, c.1480–c.1650

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The mid-sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century is generally considered to be a crucial period in the development of education in England, a time when literacy was increasing and more grammar schools were being established across the country. It is perhaps an overstatement to call this period a ‘revolution’ in educational opportunity and development, but from the end of the fifteenth century and up to the middle of the seventeenth there was a more gradual, though nonetheless significant, change in educational provision, as new grammar schools were founded and existing ones re-founded.1 There was no centralized ‘system’ of education in early modern England, but more of a network, based on a generally accepted pattern of what a grammar school should look like, and this is clearly reflected in the way schoolmasters were chosen and the form their careers might take. Schoolmasters were appointed on the strength and orthodoxy of their religious views, their reputation and moral character, as well as their learning, and were given a crucial role, in theory at least, in spreading correct religious understanding and instilling good morals; the issue of religious understanding was particularly emphasized in the second half of the sixteenth century. Yet it would seem that in practice, theirs was a job which was held in low esteem by the people they taught, and one which was generally not very well paid or well regarded compared to, for example, a job within the church. As with so much about early modern English grammar schools, there is a significant gap between theory and practice when it comes to the careers and reputations of schoolmasters during this period.

Previous studies of schoolmasters and their occupation – whether it could truly be called a profession at this point in history is a matter for discussion – have acknowledged this gap between theory and practice, so evident in many other aspects of education in early modern England, but particularly great

1 David Cressy, Education in Tudor and Stuart England (London: Edward Arnold, 1975), 8–10; Lawrence Stone, ‘The Educational Revolution in England, 1560–1640’, Past and Present, 33 (April 1966), 16–55. See Nicholas Orme, Medieval Schools: From Roman Britain to Renaissance England (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), for a discussion of a more gradual change over time.

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when it comes to schoolmasters. P.K. Orpen and David Cressy in particular have highlighted this disparity, both concluding that teaching was not the respected calling in practice that it was in theory. Cressy’s work sets teaching within the wider context of early modern professions, while Orpen has explored schoolmasters’ career patterns towards the end of the period covered here, as well as the relationship between teaching and the Church; Richard DeMolen has arrived at a similar conclusion through using one particularly well-known schoolmaster, Richard Mulcaster, as a case study. Much of the existing literature on this subject, and indeed on the topic of early modern English education in general, has tended to focus on the later sixteenth century and into the seventeenth; the early sixteenth century is generally treated by later medieval historians. This article bridges that gap by encompassing the period from the late fifteenth century until the mid-seventeenth century.

This article intends to expand upon the existing appraisal of early modern teaching and put it into a wider historical context by approaching the schoolmasters themselves as a prosopographical category. Who were these grammar schoolmasters? From what sort of background did they come, and where might they stand socially later in their lives? Where did teaching fall within their overall career patterns, and how did they become schoolmasters in the first place? This article will also examine source material such as foundation documents and school rules, outlining the hiring and conduct of the schoolmaster, as well as schoolmasters’ wills and nominations to teaching posts. The biographies of schoolmasters found in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* also play a central role, since this approach is prosopographical in nature. There are dozens of schoolmasters in the *Oxford DNB*, not just men who have been categorized as schoolmasters or headmasters, but of men who spent some time teaching during their lives, yet became better known for something else entirely. Reading many such sources as a body allows one to look for patterns over time, and to note the similarities between them, or the different career paths a schoolmaster might take. Approaching schoolmasters in this prosopographical manner will further our understanding not just of early modern schoolmasters and their work specifically, but also of wider educational developments during the early modern period. The varying criteria for hiring schoolmasters, and the gap between theory and practice which characterized contemporary views of their role, both reflect the wider non-standard and non-centralized developments of grammar school education in this period.

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2 P. K. Orpen, ‘Schoolmastering as a profession in the seventeenth century: the career patterns of the grammar schoolmaster’, *History of Education*, 6 (1977), 183–94; David Cressy, ‘A Drudgery of Schoolmasters: The Teaching Profession in Elizabethan and Stuart England’, in Wilfrid Prest (ed.), *The Professions in Early Modern England* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 129–53; Richard L. DeMolen, ‘Richard Mulcaster and the Profession of Teaching in Sixteenth-Century England’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 35 (March 1974), 121–29.
When speaking of teaching during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, it is not entirely accurate to describe it as a profession, as we would speak of teaching today, though some previous works on the subject do, understandably, use the term as a convenient label. While there was a certain sense of identity among schoolmasters as being distinct from, say, the clergy, there was no standard method of training a schoolmaster, or becoming one, that all men doing this job would share: a schoolmaster needed to be able to teach Latin grammar, but how he achieved that knowledge and the qualifications he possessed in this capacity were not standardized in this period. While many schoolmasters did have some university education, they would not have been training to be schoolmasters specifically; more likely they were preparing for ecclesiastical office. They were also educated to different levels, with some taking MA degrees, or higher, and others having only a bachelor’s degree. The statutes for schools founded or re-founded in this period never quite agree on the schoolmaster’s required educational background, with some requiring a Master’s degree, others a BA, and others not specifying at all. The same was true for their assistants, or ushers: some required a bachelor’s degree, while others were simply older students. Good character, and, later in the sixteenth century, a willingness to conform to the official religious policy, were the keys to securing a teaching post, as discussed below. While a schoolmaster’s job might not technically be a profession in the strictest sense, it was still, of course, a career. The career patterns of English schoolmasters varied considerably: it was certainly possible to teach all of one’s life, but it was by no means the norm to do so. The career of a schoolmaster could often be temporary and transient, something which becomes very apparent after reading a large number of schoolmasters’ biographies and piecing together their career paths.

Contemporary descriptions of schoolmasters and their work, such as those by Richard Mulcaster, John Brinsley, and other educationalists, paint a rather dismal picture of teaching, a thankless job whose reception in practice never quite matched its elevated image in theory. Teaching might be someone’s calling in life, but schoolmasters themselves tended to see it as a ‘toilsome’, ‘sisyphean task’, ‘moiling and drudging’. When they were not disparaged by

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3 DeMolen, ‘Richard Mulcaster and the Profession of Teaching’, 126; Kenneth Charlton, ‘The Teaching Profession in 16th and 17th Century England’, in P. W. Nash (ed.), History and Education: The Educational Uses of the Past (New York: 1970); Cressy, ‘A Drudgery of Schoolmasters’.
4 Orpen, ‘Schoolmastering as a Profession’, 183; Cressy, ‘A Drudgery of Schoolmasters’, 129.
5 See Prest, The Professions in Early Modern England, for a more extended discussion of what constituted a ‘profession’ in early modern England.
6 S. F. Ryle, ‘Bond, John (c.1550–1612)’, ODNB; John Brinsley, Ludus Literarius, or: The Grammar Schoole (1612), reprinted 1968 (Menston: Scolar Press, 1968), 2–3.
their pupils’ parents, they were feared by the students themselves; schoolmasters throughout this entire period are even typically depicted in schoolroom scenes with a rod or bundle of twigs within easy reach, if not in the actual act of beating a boy. To name but two examples, see the woodcut of a schoolroom scene in John Holt’s *Lac Puerorum*, dated to around 1495, and the marginal illustration of the indenture for Pate’s Grammar School, Cheltenham, from 1574.

In theory, it was ‘an honest labor to teche, and suche a labor that a man may both please God in and do muchoe good to the commonewelth’, according to one of the exercises in an early sixteenth-century book of translation practice, paraphrasing Cicero. In practice, however, even if they only taught for a short period of time, grammar school masters still faced the problem of having to be well prepared and knowledgeable for a job which required a great deal of effort with little recognition. In the early seventeenth century, in fact, it was not the first choice of career for many men, who had intended to join the clergy but found the job market saturated. Throughout this period, teaching was not the most aspirational career choice, not something someone would want to become tied to for the entirety of one’s life, and the fact that many men did leave it at various points in their lives for something more lucrative and more prestigious, like a career within the church, bears this out. The records kept by Winchester College of its students, which include brief details of their subsequent careers where these are known, very rarely mention these former students as becoming schoolmasters. They will note any degree a student went on to take, or positions within the church, law, or medicine, but rarely do they mention teaching, as if it was less noteworthy than a degree or one of the professions. One could also return to teaching in times of financial difficulty, purely as a way of supporting oneself if necessary. Most schoolmasters throughout this period were paid between £10 to £20 per year, with their assistants usually earning no more than half of that amount: at least joining the church offered a degree of career advancement. Despite these low salaries, however, schoolmasters were frequently given somewhere to live, near, or at, the school, rent-free, as at Guildford school, or at Guisborough, near Middlesborough, where the master was given two ‘chambers’ over the schoolhouse. While students would not generally pay to attend school, they might pay 4d. to have their names registered upon first admittance to the

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7 In Orme, ‘An Early-Tudor Oxford Schoolbook’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 34 (Spring, 1981), 11–39, 28.
8 See Mark H. Curtis, ‘The Alienated Intellectuals of Early Stuart England’, *Past and Present*, 23 (November 1962).
9 Winchester College Archives, 21584, *Liber successionis et dignitas*, 1386–1640.
10 Worth approximately £2800–£5500 today; Orpen, ‘Schoolmastering as a Profession’, 186.
school, and there is evidence for the schoolmaster keeping this money, known as ‘vails’, for himself at Sir John Deane’s School, Northwich, for example.11

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With this context in mind, let us turn to who these schoolmasters and ushers were, in terms of their background, social standing, and marital status. A sample of nearly sixty schoolmasters’ wills held in The National Archives will provide an insight into this. Most of these wills date only from the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the fact that the testators refer to themselves as schoolmasters would indicate that they were still teaching when they made their wills, indicating those who may have been life-long, career, teachers. This, as we will later see, was not always the typical career pattern, though it would become more common later in the period.

In addition to the wills, approximately one hundred and seventy early modern schoolmasters appear in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Some are well-known schoolmasters, who either taught at prestigious schools or made some greater contribution to the field of teaching and education, but many are far more obscure. Searching the Dictionary for those men classified as ‘schoolmaster’, or ‘headmaster’ is only the beginning, however. A full-text search for ‘schoolmaster’ or a similar term – even just the word ‘taught’ – will yield many more men who were schoolmasters for a portion of their lives, before going on to become the clergyman or author for whom history, and the Oxford DNB, know them best. The wills and the biographies, as well as the statutes, rules, and foundation charters of grammar schools across the country will all create a fuller picture of the lives of early modern English schoolmasters.

It is rare to learn from a will where a schoolmaster was originally from, and yet this information is valuable in terms of assessing how much they might have to move around in order to find a job. Wills, structured and phrased as they are, do not tend to explicitly state this; the testator will often state where they were living when they made the will, but it is difficult to know whether this is where they were originally from or not. Sometimes this can be ascertained through where their bequests ended up, such as whether the people of a particular community – not the same as where the schoolmaster lived at the time of making his will – were favoured with charitable bequests. Thomas Rudd’s mention of his mother in Cumbria, for example, while he was teaching in Bury St Edmund’s, could be a clue to where Rudd was originally from.12 The Oxford DNB biographies are sometimes more forthcoming on this aspect.

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11 Surrey History Centre, Woking, BR/OC/7/1, Guildford School statutes, 1608; Borthwick Institute for Archives, York (hereafter Borthwick, Bp. Sch.), Bishopthorpe Papers, Bp. Sch. 18, foundation charter of Jesus Christ School and Hospital, Guisborough, 1561; Cheshire Record Office, Chester (hereafter Cheshire RO), SL 300/2/32, statutes of Sir John Deane’s school, Northwich, c.1558.

12 The National Archives (hereafter TNA), PROB 11/55/447, will of Thomas Rudd, master of Bury St Edmund’s, 1573.
of schoolmasters’ lives, but there is no particular chronological pattern of moving across the country to teach or staying close to one’s home town or home county, as there are examples of both across the whole of this period. Schoolmasters’ movements in this regard were often dictated by who they knew, or where they had attended university or school, as certain grammar school masterships were in the gift of particular university colleges, such as that of Pocklington School, where the schoolmaster was appointed by the Master and Fellows of St John’s College, Cambridge. Sometimes being an alumnus of a school gave one an advantage over other applicants to the post, as was the case at Winchester, where the fact that a nominee to the post of schoolmaster ‘hath been brought up among you’ (in other words, he was a former Winchester pupil) was a mark in his favour.\(^\text{13}\) The master of Guisborough school had to have lived in the parish in which the school was located for the previous three years before his appointment.\(^\text{14}\)

In terms of social standing, those men who entered the world of teaching, for however short a time, tended to come from the middling sort, though there is often a limited amount of evidence regarding the social background of such men, particularly for those who taught earlier in this period. Moving later into the sixteenth century, there are some more surviving details on social background, but for the most part, it is difficult to do much more than generalize because of the lack of evidence about many schoolmasters’ and ushers’ early lives: John Holt was the son of a mayor; William Camden was a painter-stainer’s son, Alexander Gil the younger was the son of a schoolmaster; others who went into teaching were the sons of vicars, ministers, aldermen, haberdashers, and drapers, but there are also many about whose social origin we know nothing.\(^\text{15}\) These middling backgrounds are, perhaps predictably, similar to the social background their students would have come from.\(^\text{16}\)

Approximately half of the wills mention land, or livestock, or houses owned by the schoolmaster himself unconnected to the school, indicating a comfortable, if not necessarily well-off, standard of living.

Another aspect of schoolmasters’ lives frequently addressed by wills and later biographies is whether they were married or not, which could sometimes matter a great deal for their employment prospects at certain schools. As such, it tends to appear as a criterion in school foundation documents, usually to state that the schoolmaster could not be married, as at Guisborough and

\(^{13}\) Winchester College Archives, 23446, Archbishop of Canterbury to warden and fellows, 1596.

\(^{14}\) Borthwick, Bp. Sch. 18, Guisborough School foundation charter.

\(^{15}\) Orme, ‘Holt, John (d. 1504)’, ODNB; Wyman H. Herendeen, ‘Camden, William (1551–1623)’, ODNB; Gordon Campbell, ‘Gil, Alexander the younger (1596/7–1642?)’, ODNB.

\(^{16}\) ‘Gonville and Caius College admissions, 1621’, in Cressy, *Education in Tudor and Stuart England*, 128–31; J. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses – Part I: From the Earliest Times to 1751* (10 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922–54), II; Margaret M. Kay, *A History of Rivington and Blackrod Grammar School* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1931, repr. 1966), 40–4; Cressy, ‘Educational Opportunity in Tudor and Stuart England’, *History of Education Quarterly, 16* (Autumn 1976), 303, 313; Stone, ‘Social Mobility in England, 1500–1700’, *Past and Present, 33* (April 1966), 20.
Ruthin schools, for example, or that ideally he should not be: the rules for Archbishop Holgate’s school in York state that the master’s wife could not live within the cathedral close, but do not say that he could not have a wife.17 Over half of the schoolmasters with an entry in the *Oxford DNB* were definitely married, particularly, though not exclusively, those teaching later in the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century; this number is higher than those for whom no evidence of their marital status survives. Of the nearly sixty wills, just over half of these schoolmasters were married. Approximately half of the wills mention children, including the ‘supposed son’ of Thomas Battersby, master of Dent school in Yorkshire, who seems to have been well-provided for in his father’s will, even if his paternity was in doubt by Mr Battersby himself.18 Fewer than a quarter of the biographies mention children, but they are there, appearing more frequently from the later sixteenth century onwards, with the occasional son succeeding his father as schoolmaster, perhaps having previously worked as his usher, such as John Dawes and his son at Ipswich in 1580, and Alexander Gil and his son at St Paul’s in the early seventeenth century.19

Whether schoolmasters were allowed to be married or not, or whether they were also ordained clergy, tended to change more on the basis of a school founder’s wishes, and was less to do with change over time. Schoolmasters early in this period might be married, like William Lily, John Rightwise, and, earlier still, John Anwykyl. These early masters would have been either married, or ordained, of course, not both, while from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, they could be both, once clergy were allowed to marry. Teaching might give a pre-Reformation schoolmaster the option of marrying, while joining the clergy did not, while some later schools specifically required their masters to be unmarried purely for practical reasons, since the responsibility of maintaining a wife and family might distract from his teaching and mean he might need to be paid more.20 The schoolmaster at Guisborough, was required to be ‘a priest in order’, and unmarried, even though this was 1561 and he legally could have been both ordained and married. Both the master and usher of Ruthin School, founded in 1574, were supposed to be ‘single and unmarried’.21 Nicholas Grey forfeited his position as headmaster of Charterhouse school when he married in around 1614.22 Later in the century,

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17 Borthwick, Bp. Sch. 53, 8, Archbishop Holgate’s School foundation charter, 1546; Borthwick, Bp. Sch. 18, Guisborough School foundation charter; ‘Ruthin school rules, 1574’, in D.W. Sylvester (ed.), *Educational Documents 800–1816* (London: Methuen & Co., 1970), 110–16, 110. Ruthin is, of course, a Welsh example, but its rules reflect the practice at English grammar schools.

18 TNA, PROB 11/239/329, will of Thomas Battersby, schoolmaster of Dent, Yorkshire, 1654.

19 J. M. Blatchly, ‘Dawes (Daus), John (c.1512–1602), *ODNB*; Campbell, ‘Gil, Alexander the younger (1596/7–1642?)’, *ODNB*.

20 Orme, *Education in Early Tudor England: Magdalen College Oxford and its School, 1480–1540* (Oxford: Magdalen College, 1998), 1.

21 Borthwick, Bp. Sch. 18, Guisborough School foundation charter; ‘Ruthin School Rules’, in Sylvester, *Educational Documents*, 111.

22 C. S. Knighton, ‘Grey, Nicholas (c.1589/90–1660)’, *ODNB*. 
schoolmasters were more often married than not, though there is no sudden observable change from early sixteenth-century schoolmasters being unmarried and later ones marrying.

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The biographies, read together as a body of sources, give us a picture of changing career patterns, which indicate that schoolmasters might spend a short time teaching, or might move between different schools, or teach first and then join the church, or teach alongside a role in the church. Those schoolmasters who did much of their teaching before the Reformation, tended either to hold ecclesiastical positions alongside a lifelong teaching career, or taught for most of their lives, but eventually left teaching for a more financially secure and higher-regarded one in the church. Those masters who were active in the middle decades of the sixteenth century tended, in general, to remain schoolmasters for longer periods of their lives, but, like their predecessors, left teaching to become beneficed clerics, or held a church post alongside their teaching duties.

During the second half of the century, it is more common to see schoolmasters also classified by the *Oxford DNB* as clergymen, or writers, compared to their earlier counterparts who are frequently referred to as grammarians and schoolmasters. Later sixteenth-century schoolmasters also held other roles besides teaching. This was not a completely new phenomenon, but seems to have become more common as the sixteenth century progressed. Some practised medicine alongside their teaching, often taking a degree in the subject, such as John Bond at Taunton between 1579 and 1601, Christopher Johnson while Headmaster of Winchester in the 1560s, and Philemon Holland during his long period as usher of Coventry school from the early 1580s to 1623.23 In addition, schoolmasters might hold some form of public office. This conforms to the contemporary expectations of certain men in society holding some form of public office, in local government or even Parliament, thereby putting their education to use for the public good: Richard Mulcaster was MP for Carlisle, his home town, before becoming headmaster of Merchant Taylors’ School, London, in 1561, while John Twyne was mayor and MP for Canterbury.24 Later schoolmasters seem to have followed the pattern of being schoolmaster and cleric – or other job, as discussed above – for life. This is the pattern which continued into the seventeenth century, as teaching for a longer period, perhaps for life, became more common.

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23 Ryle, ‘Bond, John’, *ODNB*; D. K. Money, ‘Johnson, Christopher (c.1536–1597)’, *ODNR*; John Considine, ‘Philemon Holland (1552–1637)’, *ODNB*.

24 William Barker, ‘Mulcaster, Richard (1531/2–1611)’, *ODNR*; G. H. Martin, ‘Twyne, John (c.1505–1581)’, *ODNB*; see Mark Goldie, ‘The Unacknowledged Republic: Officeholding in Early Modern England’, in Tim Harris (ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded, c.1500–1850* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001) for more on the importance of participation in government and the role played by humanist education.
Of those schoolmasters from the *Oxford DNB* whose educational background is known, at the university level at least, over half were educated to an MA level, or earned this degree very shortly after taking up a teaching post. Some acquired higher degrees, or bachelor’s degrees in law or theology rather than arts, later in their lives, but upon becoming schoolmasters, they frequently already had two university degrees to their names. For their assistants, the ushers, some degree of grammar school education was certainly necessary, but anything beyond that was not always a requirement, as will be discussed later. Of those schoolmasters who were born around, or prior to, 1500, virtually all had taken degrees in grammar, arts, or theology, with most proceeding to the MA. Of those men who were active in the middle of the sixteenth century, where we have evidence of their educational background, their education was similar to their predecessors earlier in the century, though with fewer and fewer earning degrees in grammar.

Just as important as his skills in grammar and rhetoric, however, was the schoolmaster’s ability, *in loco parentis*, to mould the boys into obedient, industrious, Christian young men, and set a good example to them in this regard. School statutes and schoolmaster nominations provide a very clear picture, across this entire period, of the high moral standards expected of a schoolmaster. The ‘maister of the scolers’ at Guisborough school was to ‘examyned’ by the Archdeacon of Cleveland ‘touching his lernyng and honest livyng’, and he had to take an oath that he would do nothing which may hinder ‘the godlie bringyng[e] up, or diligent instructing of the saied scolers’. He was then ready to ‘teache scolers hither resorting not onelie gram[er] and other vertuous doctrynes, but also honest man[er]s, and godlie living’.25 Other foundation documents are even more specific on what constituted acceptable or unacceptable conduct in a schoolmaster. At Archbishop Holgate’s School in 1546, and at Hawkshead School, Cumbria, forty years later, the grounds for dismissing a schoolmaster are identical: if he committed ‘herysie, treason, murder or felony’ his position was, predictably, declared ‘voyd’. At both schools, if the master was ‘a comon dronkerd’, failed to pay his usher, was negligent in his teaching, or had a disease that prevented him from teaching, he would be dismissed.26 The statutes for Guisborough school of 1561 are also very similar, though the founder has added that the master should not be a ‘dicer’ or ‘carder’, and emphasizes his ‘honest conversation’ and ‘good name and fame’.27 A potential schoolmaster’s character, morals, and reputation were emphasized more insistently than even his formal education, and are one of the only constants among the school statutes of this period.

25 Borthwick, Bp. Sch. 18, 7, 4, Guisborough School foundation charter.
26 Borthwick, Bp. Sch. 53, 5, Archbishop Holgate’s School foundation charter; Borthwick, Bp. Sch. 25, 9, Hawkshead Grammar School foundation charter, 1588.
27 Borthwick, Bp. Sch. 18, 11, 4, Guisborough School foundation charter.
After the mid sixteenth century, a further, crucial, factor in a schoolmaster’s appointment or dismissal was that he be of a ‘right understanding of God’s true religion’, whether that meant Catholicism during Mary’s reign, or a moderate Protestantism after 1558. Schoolmasters were examined ‘in learning and religion’ by school governors when they were appointed, but also, in some cases, during the regular visitations of the governors to the school, in order to gauge how well they were fulfilling that element of the job. At Wakefield school in 1591, if the master had ‘a popish disposition’, for example, he was no longer suitable to continue teaching there (though if his Catholicism had been known at the time of his appointment, he would not have gotten the job at all). A schoolmaster was required to teach from the official grammar, bring his students to church, and maintain an honest reputation, though the articles enquired of schoolmasters within the diocese of Winchester in 1575 included whether they ‘propunde to [their students] any Themes, vulgares, or subtil questions, wherby matters of Religion concluded and established myght be made doubtfull unto them, or they induced to deryde or scoffe at any godly order, Ryte or Ceremony now set forth and allowed’. The schoolmaster began to take on a new role in spreading the official faith, meaning he was not only supposed to provide religious instruction, but also discourage any dissent from the official church, whether the Catholic church under Mary or the Church of England under Elizabeth, hence his oath and need for a license.

The schoolmaster, however, did not actually teach a great deal of religious material, and rarely did he devise such material himself: this is surprising given the importance placed upon ‘correct’ religious understanding at this time, and given how much other parts of Europe emphasized religious instruction after the Reformation. Earlier in the sixteenth century, there are examples of schoolmasters actively participating in church services: for instance, at Sir Thomas Boteler’s school in Warrington, near Liverpool, founded in 1526, the master was a priest, and he participated, with a local chantry priest, in saying masses for the school’s founder. The phrase ‘and every other priest which shall be chosen schoolmaster’, used throughout in reference to future masters, implies that the master would always be a priest, as if this was simply an accepted fact. The master of Malpas School, Cheshire, founded a year later, had a similar commitment, and was also in charge of the lands belonging to the school and the rents therefrom. In 1548, the master of Skipton

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28 ‘Royal Injunctions, 1559’, Injunction 40, in A. F. Leach (ed.), Educational Charters and Documents 598–1909 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 494–5.
29 Borthwick, Bp. Sch. 46, foundation charter and statutes of Wakefield School.
30 Church of England, Articles to be Enquired of within the Diocese of Winchester, in the Metropolitall Visitation of the Most Revered Father in Christ, Matthew by the Providence of God, Archbyshop of Canterbury, Primate of all England, and Metropolitan (John Day, 1575), sig. Bii r., EEBO.
31 Cheshire RO, SL382/18/1, Warrington Boteler School foundation deed, 1526.
32 Cheshire RO, DCH/C/446, Malpas Grammar School foundation charter, 1527.
Early Modern English Schoolmasters

School, Yorkshire, came to Skipton church to read and sing three mornings during the week, and the school’s statutes state that could be removed from the mastership for not fulfilling his ‘sacerdotal office’; at most schools this was the other way around, in that church duties were not to distract from his teaching.\textsuperscript{33} This was not the case for every schoolmaster, and in terms of what the master actually taught in his classroom, there was very little time dedicated to religious instruction: at Eton in 1530, there were prayers at several points during the day, and ‘hymmys’ (hymns) twice a week, but the majority of the week’s work was devoted to studying classical material. At Ruthin in 1574, the week looked very similar, only with an hour or two of catechism study on Saturday afternoons, and by 1616, the weekly timetable at Hertford school looked very similar: prayers every day, and catechism and church once a week. By the later sixteenth century this seems to have become the general pattern: the schoolmaster lead his students in prayers at the beginning and end of each day, often those which had been prescribed by the school’s founder in the statutes; he expounded the approved catechism to his students on Saturday afternoons; and brought his students to listen to the sermon on Sundays, on which most schools seem to have tested their students the next day.\textsuperscript{34} That was all: the schoolmaster was ensuring that his students were observing the official forms of worship, and was himself subscribed to the official religion. This is certainly not to say that all pre-Reformation English schoolmasters were priests, or always fulfilled some kind of religious office, and that suddenly after the Reformation they were not. It is more to illustrate the point that despite the increased emphasis on religious conformity, schoolmasters taught more classical Latin then religious material, and that after the mid-sixteenth century, their religious duties started to look more standard.

Beginning in the 1550s, a schoolmaster could not teach either in a school or in a private home without episcopal assent: from 1554 this involved an examination by a bishop, and from 1559 an oath and an episcopal license. It is more common for records of licences granted to survive than the actual licences, since these licences were kept by the schoolmasters themselves. In granting a schoolmaster a license, ‘life and religion’ (read: religious conformity) were just as important as his formal learning.\textsuperscript{35} A schoolmaster could lose his licence if he failed to bring his students to church as required, did not use the official catechism or grammar, or if the governors or visitors of the school found him to be generally negligent in his teaching, similar to the grounds for removing him from his post.

\textsuperscript{33} North Yorkshire Record Office, Northallerton, PR/BNA/18/1/1, endowment deed for Skipton Grammar School, 1548.

\textsuperscript{34} ‘Eton and Winchester Timetables, 1530’, in Leach (ed.), \textit{Educational Charters and Documents}, 448–51; ‘Ruthin School rules’, in Sylvester, \textit{Educational Documents}, 110–16; BL Add. MS 33578, papers relating to the Free Grammar School at Hertford, 1616–1671.

\textsuperscript{35} Cressy, ‘A Drudgery of Schoolmasters’, 139.
As well as a license, a would-be schoolmaster needed ‘the testimonie of godly men, touching hys life and manners, and especially his religion’. A very detailed example of such testimony survives in the archives of Winchester College, where one Benjamin Heydon, a former Winchester pupil, was chosen to succeed the outgoing schoolmaster in 1596. Four letters are extant, one recommending Heydon to the Bishop of Winchester, the others from other potential patrons including the said Bishop, recommending Heydon to the warden and fellows of the College. Winchester College was a more prosperous, prestigious, school, the patronage associated with it being more valuable than many smaller grammar schools, but it nonetheless illustrates the importance of the aforesaid ‘testimonie of godly men’, as Heydon’s referees commend his previous experience at Winchester, his ‘learning, discretion, and sobrietie’, and the ‘moderation of his careynge with fit discretion for such a room’. Other recommendations survive from Winchester in the 1570s, in one case for two competing candidates in 1578/9; the proposed schoolmasters’ qualities are all similar to those outlined so far: the usual variation on ‘life, religion, and learning’. These are all examples of, essentially, providing references for these potential schoolmasters. Sometimes a man searching for a teaching post might write on his own behalf, as one John Blakeway did in Ludlow in the early seventeenth century. Writing to the aldermen and corporation of the town, who would have had the authority to choose, or at least nominate, the schoolmaster, he describes himself as ‘a man in degree equall to any that have bene in that place many yeares past’. Another letter survives alongside this, from one Thomas Cornwalle, but presented to the aldermen by Blakeway himself, emphasising Blakeway’s status as Master of Arts and describing him as an ‘honest man’ and a ‘good teacher’, as well as the fact that Cornwalle is himself both honest and good at teaching, rendering his testimony that much more reliable.

Even if little else about their job was consistent or standardized, schoolmasters did at least share the need to be licensed before they could teach. Choosing an usher, or assistant master, however, was often a much more informal process than choosing a master, since not every school necessarily needed one. An usher might simply be chosen by the schoolmaster himself: the master of Archbishop Holgate’s school had the power to choose his usher, and was responsible for paying him, for example. He might even be simply an older student, chosen by the master to teach the lower forms, as at Guisborough and St Bee’s; when the usher at Holgate’s school, or at Hawkshead, had to fill

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36 Church of England, *A Booke of Certaine Canons, Concernyng Some Parte of the Discipline of the Church of England In the year of our Lord 1571* (John Day, 1571), 25, EEBO.
37 Winchester College Archives, 23442–3, 23445–8, recommendations of new masters and ushers 1571–96.
38 Shropshire Record Office, LB7/1-4, Applications for post of schoolmaster, Ludlow Grammar School, early 17th C.
39 Borthwick, Bp. Sch. 53, Archbishop Holgate’s School foundation charter.
in for the schoolmaster, an older student filled in for him as usher. A more formal approach might involve senior clergy in the usher’s appointment, as at Blackburn School, Lancashire, where in 1606 the school’s governors required the assent of the Bishop of Chester in order to pick the new usher. The governors of Holgate’s school, and if necessary the archbishop himself, intervened in cases of misconduct or poor teaching, because even though he was chosen by the master, the usher was held to the same disciplinary standards as him. Not every school, however, needed an usher, or could afford to employ one, so this role was never as formal as that of the schoolmaster. The usher could, therefore, be exempt, in a way the schoolmaster could not, from taking any kind of oath of supremacy. Some ushers were educated to a BA level, and some had even earned MAs when they became usher, such as John Holt at Magdalen College School, Oxford, John Rightwise at St Paul’s, and Richard Argentine at Ipswich; later examples include Thomas Ingmethorpe at Worcester and Alexander Gil the younger at St Paul’s (who acted as usher under his own father, Alexander Gil the elder, who had also taught him). If they possessed a BA or an MA, they had often just finished these degrees and being an usher might be their first job. Sometimes it is directly specified in a school’s statutes that the usher possess a BA, such as at Bristol in 1532, and Ruthin in 1574, but this was by no means the norm, as many foundation documents will say nothing at all about the usher’s educational requirements; they focus, as they tend to do for the master, on the potential usher’s moral qualities: in other words, on whether he was ‘an example to tender youth in every virtue’, and ‘well-reported of’ for his honest life and ‘conversation’. Though he was paid less than the master, the usher might teach more students than the master, and would have been responsible for instilling the basics of Latin grammar to younger students. It was rare to spend all of one’s life as an usher, though this was certainly not unheard of: Lawrence Scailes was usher of Hull grammar school for forty years, John Vicars usher at Christ’s Hospital, London, all his life, and the translator Philemon Holland was usher of Coventry grammar school for forty years, until he was nearly seventy. It

40 Borthwick, Bp. Sch. 18, Guisborough School foundation charter; ‘St Bee’s School statutes, 1583’ in Nicholas Carlisle (ed.), A Concise Description of the Endowed Grammar Schools of England and Wales (2 vols., London: Baldwin, Craddock, and Joy, 1818, reprinted Richmond, 1972), I, 157; Bp. Sch. 53, Archbishop Holgate’s School foundation charter; Bp. Sch. 25, Hawkshead Grammar School foundation charter.
41 Lancashire Record Office, Preston, DDX94/163, miscellaneous documents relating to Rivington and Blackrod schools, 1560–19th C.; Bp. Sch. 53, Archbishop Holgate’s School foundation charter.
42 Orme, ‘Holt, John’, ODNB; Richard Beadle, ‘Rightwise, John (c.1490–1533)’, ODNB; Blatchly, ‘Argentine, Richard (1510/11-1568)’, ODNB; C.S. Knighton, ‘Ingmethorpe, Thomas (c.1564–1638)’, ODNB; Campbell, ‘Gil, Alexander the younger’, ODNB.
43 ‘Bristol Grammar School rules, 1532’, in Carlisle, Concise Description, II, 405; ‘Ruthin School Rules’, in Sylvester, Educational Documents, 110. These phrases appear with slight variations in most rules or statutes.
44 John Lawson, The Endowed Grammar Schools of East Yorkshire (York: East Yorkshire Local History Society, 1962), 19; Julia Gasper, ‘Vicars, John (1580–1652), ODNB; Considine, ‘Holland, Philemon’, ODNB.
was far more usual to move up to be a schoolmaster, or into another job, than it was to act as an assistant schoolmaster for life.

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Once secure in their post, schoolmasters often revised and supplemented the texts with which they and their students worked, in order to make the Latin grammar and phrases more accessible and easier to learn. A great deal of the material used in the classroom might be created by the schoolmaster himself. Lily’s Grammar, ubiquitous after 1540 and so well-known to contemporaries that they often did not refer to it by name in school statutes, is perhaps the best-known example, compiled by William Lily while master of St Paul’s, but it was far from alone. Nicholas Udall’s *Flourtes for Latin Speaking* (1533) aided his students in drawing out the most important sections of the works of Terence, while the library of Shrewsbury School at one time contained ‘too little bookes of Dialogues drawen out of Tullyes offices [Cicero’s *De officiis*] and Lodovicus Vives’, by Thomas Ashton, the master there. One early way to practise Latin translation was through the use of *vulgaria*, or English sentences meant to be translated into Latin, and these, too, were often written by the schoolmasters themselves. These kinds of texts have been explored elsewhere in greater depth, and they highlight the schoolmaster’s efforts to engage his students by making the subjects of these practice sentences familiar to them, drawing on everyday experience. Schoolmasters compiled dictionaries for their students’ use: William Malym wrote a polyglot lexicon while headmaster at St Paul’s during the 1570s, John Baret’s *Alvearie*, a dictionary in English, Latin, and French was compiled while Baret was teaching in London in 1574; and John Harmar wrote a Greek dictionary for use at his school at St Alban’s in 1637. Some might edit the classical texts they used in their classrooms, as John Bond at Taunton school did for Horace in 1606, explaining the references and context of Horace’s work. There is also an English translation of Lily’s *Brevissima institutio grammatices* preserved in the Leeds Brotherton Library, in manuscript form: dating from sometime between 1560 and 1600, it is not a direct translation, but rather more of a summary of the contents, beginning with the list of Greek letters found in Lily’s text, and moving on to

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45 Ian Green, *Humanism and Protestantism in Early Modern English Education* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 99.
46 J. B. Oldham, ‘Shrewsbury School Library: Its Earlier History and Organisation’, *Transactions of the Bibliographical Society, New Series*, xvi, 1 (June 1935), 54.
47 Orme, ‘An Early-Tudor Oxford Schoolbook’, 11–39; William Nelson (ed.), *A Fifteenth-Century Schoolbook, From a Manuscript in the British Museum (MS Arundel 249)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956).
48 Stephen Wright, ‘Malym (Malim), William (1533–1594)’, *ODNB*; Elisabeth Leedham-Green, ‘Harmar, John (1593x6–1670)’, *ODNB*; John Baret, *An Alvearie or Triple Dictionarie in Englishe, Latin, and French: Very Profitable for All Such as be Desirous of Any of Those Three Languages* (Henry Denham, 1574), EEBO.
49 John Bond, *Quinti horatii flacci poemata scholast sic annotationibus, quae brevis commentarii vice esse possint a Ioanne Bond illustrata* (Richard Field, 1606), EEBO; Ryle, ‘Bond, John’, *ODNB*. 
the explanations of *orthographia*, *etymologia*, *syntaxis*, and *prosodia*. Some of the examples are borrowed from Lily, while some sections have been explained further than what is given in Lily. The handwriting becomes gradually more and more untidy, and the roughly A4-size sheets of paper are tied together with strips of old used parchment. There is no description of where this translation came from or why it was made, but it may have been created by the schoolmaster for the benefit of a struggling student, turning the Latin text into English, or perhaps – though less likely – it is some condensed notes on the text to make it easier for the schoolmaster to teach it. Whatever its purpose, it is a revealing insight into a schoolmaster’s teaching methods from a practical day-to-day perspective.

Finally, schoolmasters might write plays for their pupils to perform, in English, in Latin, or in both languages. Sometimes these plays were just read aloud in school, for purely instructional purposes, but sometimes they were actual performances, written and directed by the schoolmasters to give their pupils practice in oratory and memorization, such as Nicholas Udall’s plays performed at court in 1537–38, and the religious plays written by Thomas Ashton at Shrewsbury school during the 1560s, performed in Shrewsbury every year at Whitsuntide. One final aspect of a schoolmaster’s career which is sometimes highlighted in their wills is that they might bequeath books to the schools at which they taught. Just under half of the wills examined here mention books; of those that do, they are mostly classical texts, dictionaries, histories and chronicles, books on arithmetic and astronomy, or religious texts such as Bibles or works by reformers. These books tended to be left to family and friends, or occasionally a student or master of a nearby school might be the recipient of a bequest of a book, but there are also examples of masters leaving books to their schools specifically: Thomas Rudd did so with his remaining, unspecified books, along with his desk; John Woodhouse in 1632 left Erasmus’ *Chiliades* and a ‘Nizolius’ – a dictionary of words appearing in Cicero’s work – to the grammar school of Chichester where he had been master, and in 1608 John Baker left several books on astronomy, cosmography, and arithmetic (subjects which were not directly taught at most grammar schools) as well as maps, ‘to be placed in the librarie of the sayd schoole [Shrewsbury] to remaine to the use of the schoolmaster and schollers of the saide schoole for the tyme being for ever’. A little later in the seventeenth century, Richard Facey of Henley-on-Thames left seven books to his school in 1647, including texts by Quintilian

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50 University of Leeds, Brotherton Library, Brotherton Collection MS Lg q 1, *Brevissima institutio grammatici*, 1557, and unpublished manuscript English translation, c.1560–1600.

51 Matthew Steggle, ‘Udall, Nicholas (1504–1556)’, *ODNB*; John Brickdale Blakeway, *A History of Shrewsbury School from the Blakeway Manuscripts*, ed. William Allport Leighton (Shrewsbury, 1889), 53, 56; J. Basil Oldham, *A History of Shrewsbury School 1552–1952* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott, 1952), 12.
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and Homer, Erasmus’ *Adages*, and Tunstall’s *Arithmetic*, and as late as 1655, Thomas Jackson left a copy of Erasmus’ *Adages* to his school at Penrith.\(^{52}\)

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The late 1640s witnessed a certain amount of disruption to schoolmasters’ teaching posts, particularly as both clergy and schoolmasters found themselves in danger of being ejected from their places after the Civil War began. The mid-seventeenth century also saw new ideas proposed about what should constitute an ideal education, such as those put forward by educational theorists like Hartlib and Comenius, who advocated for a wider range of education, beyond the Latin and Greek curriculum. The number of grammar school foundations or re-foundations had also started to tail off during the reign of Charles I. For these reasons, this study of early modern schoolmasters ends in approximately 1650, since these later developments in education constitute another study in their own right.

As was the case with early modern educational developments more widely, changes in teaching careers were gradual and nuanced. Schoolmasters and their careers reflect the very non-standardized nature of early modern English grammar schools more generally in terms of how they were chosen for the job, as well as the gap between theory and practice apparent in what schoolmasters were required to do and how they were rewarded for their efforts, particularly when those efforts were in the interests of religious reform. Schoolmasters’ careers may, on the whole, have become longer, but throughout this period there is a persistent sense of teaching being a step on the way towards something greater, rather than a career to which one might aspire. In taking a prosopographical approach, this article has explored the biographical elements in a schoolmaster’s life and the potential trajectory of his career, whatever that career may have looked like, in order to better understand where the occupation of teaching sat in early modern society more generally, and how teaching was perceived during an important period of development in English education. By focussing on school foundation documents and rules as they pertain to schoolmasters, by examining their wills, and by finding schoolmasters, often hidden, in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, it has brought attention to an under-acknowledged historical category, one which can provide an eminently useful perspective on educational development during the English Renaissance.

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\(^{52}\) TNA, PROB 11/55/447, will of Thomas Rudd; TNA, PROB 11/111/26, will of John Baker, gentleman and second schoolmaster of the Free Grammar School of Shrewsbury, 1608; TNA, PROB 11/162/164, will of John Woodhouse, master of Chichester, 1632; TNA PROB 11/200/520, will of Richard Facey, schoolmaster of Henley-on-Thames, 1647; TNA PROB 11/248/551, will of Thomas Jackson, master of Penrith school, 1655.
Abstract

The late fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries marked an important time in the development of education in England, as new grammar schools were founded and existing ones re-founded: teaching in these schools was, in theory, an important job. Yet in practice, teaching was not generally well paid or highly regarded, its qualifications and training being loosely defined and non-standard. Previous studies of schoolmasters have focussed on this gap between theory and practice, evident in many aspects of early modern English education. This article intends to expand upon this appraisal of early modern teaching, by approaching the schoolmasters themselves as a prosopographical category. Who were these grammar school masters? What was their education level and social standing? What did their career patterns look like, and how did they become schoolmasters? Grammar school foundation documents and rules, outlining the hiring and conduct of the schoolmaster, as well as schoolmasters’ wills, are some of our most important sources, as are the schoolmasters’ biographies found in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Approaching schoolmasters in this way will broaden our understanding not just of early modern schoolmasters and their work specifically, but also of wider educational developments during the early modern period.

Keywords: education, prosopography, schoolmaster