



Harpenden History Society  
School Resource  
KS3 / KS4

# The Tragic Case of Mr Bingham's Daughter



A class outside the Harpenden Board School, early 1900s

## The Tragic Case of Mr Bingham's daughter

### Teachers' notes

This lesson is based on research I undertook at the Hertfordshire local studies and archives, researching the history of the Board School which resided in the building now used by Harpenden Academy. The school later moved to Manland common and still later would be split into a primary school – Manland School and secondary school – Sir John Lawes school.

Whilst reading through the minutes from the School Board meetings for 1898, I came across a reference to a letter received from a Mr Bingham reporting that his daughter had been struck on the head by a teacher and subsequently died. The board resolved to investigate the matter, remind the teachers of the punishment guidelines, and to invite the parents in so they could offer condolences. I was shocked by the way in which this was subsumed into the ordinary business of the meeting and quickly read on to find out what happened next. There was no further mention of the death. The girl's name doesn't even appear. I attempted to find out more. I was able to find her name by looking at the census records – she was 8 year old Lily Bingham. I then searched for inquest records. Although none survive for St Albans coroner's court, they would have been reported in the press. A thorough reading of local papers for the weeks following the death revealed nothing – no inquest had been held. The only other piece of evidence I could find was her death certificate. I wrote off for it, and read there that the cause of her death was recorded as tubercular meningitis.

There was something inexpressibly sad about the way in which her death just scratches the surface of the historic records. I wanted to bring this to light in this educational resource, as I think even the little we know about her is very moving and speaks volumes about how differently the lives of children, particularly poorer children, were valued by the authorities at the time. I also felt there was a lesson here about historical evidence: sometimes the very lack of evidence can tell us something important.

Finally, this remains a mystery, and it's important for students to understand that often we can't be sure about the past. We are left to wonder what happened to Lily Bingham. Was she hit by a teacher? Was the story just an invention of a distressed father, desperate to blame someone for his daughter's death? Or was the recording of her death as tubercular meningitis incorrect? Perhaps the doctor who attended her death was not aware of the alleged blow to the head. Perhaps he was inclined to ignore the accusations – did he know members of the school board, who were powerful local people? Is it possible that she was struck and this worsened her pre-existing condition? It seems to me that any of these are plausible explanations, and unless we find further evidence we will not know for sure.

This resource attempts to reconstruct the process of research, so the students can gain a kind of first hand experience of it. It constantly raises their hopes of finding more information, only for them to return empty handed. It is crucial that they understand at each stage that the very absence of evidence speaks volumes: the school board didn't feel any responsibility to follow this up in a future meeting; the authorities didn't feel the need to examine this child's death in an inquest; the police were not called in by anyone to investigate. Her death went almost unmarked, and she remained unnamed in the school's records. By doing this work themselves, the students are taking her death seriously in a way that it seems nobody outside the family did at the time.

## Lesson plan: The tragic case of Mr Bingham's daughter

### Introduction

If you wish to start with a learning objective or enquiry question, keep it very broad at the start, so as not to give away what they will find out:

- L.O. To use documents from an archive to investigate an aspect of local history
- What can we learn about Harpenden's history from archival documents?

Ask the students what kind of things historians use as historical evidence. Then ask them where they find these. (Many students think of documents as being found in the attic, rather than consciously preserved in archives.)

Explain / clarify that an archive is a place where documents are kept safely for people to consult either in historical research or for other practical reasons (e.g. legal documents, plans of buildings etc). The documents are catalogued – each file of documents will have its own reference number, and a brief description of the kind of documents that can be found in that file.

### Starter activity – mystery document – document 2

Explain to the class that you are going to give them a scan of one original document from the archives. [Document 2 - School Board meeting minutes, 4<sup>th</sup> April 1898] Just by looking at it and reading it they must try to work out:

- What kind of document it is
- Where it relates to
- When it was made
- Why it was made
- Who made it

After 5 minutes the students feed back their ideas.

Show them the catalogue entry for the document:

[you can type in the document reference **HEd1/23** into advanced search]:

<http://calm.hertfordshire.gov.uk/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=CHEd%2f3%2f55%2f56%2f1%2f1%2f1&pos=2>

This is a page from the minutes of the School Board, effectively the governors' meeting, for the Board School in Harpenden from 4 April, 1898.

Look at how brief the catalogue description is, then show them the outside of the book of meeting notes [document 1], and have them think about how much information is contained within it, that we can't search on the catalogue. Sometimes, when researchers delve into volumes like this, they find things they don't expect to find – the past offers up its secrets.

## **Stage 1 of main activity – reading document 3 – School Board minutes**

Explain that you are going to give them all a scan of the same page of notes from a managers meeting – the third page of the meeting they have just been looking at, as this was one that a researcher came across when looking into the school's history. Can they work out why she thought this one was interesting?

[Give them document 3 - School Board meeting minutes, 4<sup>th</sup> April 1898 (page 3)]

Students feed back.

Ask them, what particularly surprises them about this? Draw out what they think about how the school seems to be reacting to this, as well as the facts stated there.

Write on the board:

- What do you know already?
- What else do you want to find out?

You could agree on your enquiry question here, something broad like:

“What can we find out about what happened to Mr Bingham’s daughter?”

Now ask them how they are going to find out more – guide them to think about what other documents might exist.

You could prompt them to think about what would have happened next, and whether that would have produced documents.

Ideas they might have (/you might prompt)

- Police report / other police investigation records
- Newspaper coverage
- School records – in the managers meeting notes as well as other records
- School register to work out who the girl was
- Inquest report
- Death certificate

Ask them where the obvious place to start is, if you are sitting in the archives with this book in front of you.... (read on!)

## **Stage 2 – reading on in the school board meeting notes notes**

Give out the next pages of the school board meeting notes, instructing the students to make notes of any references at all to this case in further meetings. [Each student will have one document – use documents 4-9]

Students feed back (there are no further mentions, you don't even find out the girl's name.) Are they surprised by this?

Show them the one further document that has been located in the school records, relating to this – the punishment guidelines [document 10].

### **Stage 3 – information about the girl – the census**

What do they think they should look at next?

They might say for example, and inquest report. Ask them what information they might need about the case to find the inquest report. Prompt them to think about her name.

How could we find this out? We have no school register surviving, but we do know her father's name so we can use the census.

[These can be accessed online via [ancestry.co.uk](http://ancestry.co.uk) or [findmypast.co.uk](http://findmypast.co.uk) both of which are subscription sites that offer free trials for a limited period. Searching this online would be more meaningful for the students if it is possible.]

Give the students the copy of the 1891 census [document 11], and let them find the names of the Bingham there.

Then give them out the 1901 census [documents 12&13], so they can see who is missing.

What else can we learn about her and her family from the census?

### **Stage 4 – further research – inquest reports in newspapers**

Now they could go on to look further at other records. Given what they know so far, which do they expect would have been made? Do they think there was a police investigation? Do they think there was an inquest?

If there were a police investigation, there would have been an inquest, and a record of this might be easier to find.

Inquest records were regarded as the personal documents of the coroner, so not many survive, however inquests were routinely reported in the local newspaper. You would expect there to be an inquest in this kind of case.

Get the students to tell you what dates you should look at for the newspaper pages (newspapers published on Saturdays – 26 Mar, 2 Apr, 9 Apr, 16 Apr).

Give out the relevant pages [documents 14-16, relevant pages from 2<sup>nd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> April], asking them to look at every article relating to an inquest.

Students feed back what they've found – no report of inquest. The managers meeting is reported and summarised, but no report of Mr Bingham's letter is included. What does this tell us? [There was no inquest, there was no police report – a girl has died, after her father alleges she was struck on the head, and we can find no evidence of any investigation.]

## **Stage 5 – death certificate**

You can find the registers of death online for free

Search here:

<https://www.freebmd.org.uk/cgi/search.pl>

Make sure you click on the scan of the original printed page to show the children. [The other Bingham listed are people who died in other parts of the country that year.]

You can send off for the death certificate which you need to pay for, luckily the researcher did.

Show the students the death certificate [document 17], and provide them with the following information:

Tubercular meningitis is a form of meningitis that can result after a child has suffered from TB. A person is usually unwell for 2-6 weeks with flu-like symptoms, before the illness gets more severe and can be life threatening.

Draw attention to the dates:

3 April – Lily died

4 April – managers meeting (so her father wrote letter either 3 or 4 April)

5 April – her death was registered, and recorded as tubercular meningitis (after Mr Bingham sent his letter)

Pair and share:

What different explanations can they come up with for what has happened?

What do they think is the most likely explanation?

How sure can we be?

## **Plenary**

Class discussion:

What can we learn about Victorian attitudes towards children from the case of Lily Bingham?

## DOCUMENT LIST

Document number	Description
1	School Board meeting minutes, outside of volume [HALS HEd1/23]
2	School Board meeting minutes, 4 <sup>th</sup> April 1898 (page 1)
3	School Board meeting minutes, 4 <sup>th</sup> April 1898 (page 3)
4	School Board meeting minutes, 4 <sup>th</sup> April 1898 (page 4)
5	School Board meeting minutes, 2 <sup>nd</sup> May 1898 (page 1)
6	School Board meeting minutes, 2 <sup>nd</sup> May 1898 (page 2)
7	School Board meeting minutes, 2 <sup>nd</sup> May 1898 (page 3)
8	School Board meeting minutes, 2 <sup>nd</sup> May 1898 (page 4)
9	School Board meeting minutes, 6 <sup>th</sup> June 1898
10	Harpenden School Board, Punishment Guidelines, 12 <sup>th</sup> January, 1897
11	Census, Harpenden, 1891
12	Census, Harpenden, 1901 (p.85)
13	Census, Harpenden, 1901 (p.86)
14 (in two parts: a&b)	Herts Advertiser & St. Albans Times, Saturday 2 <sup>nd</sup> April, 1898 (pages containing inquest reports)
15 (in two parts: a&b)	Herts Advertiser & St. Albans Times, Saturday 9th April, 1898 (pages containing inquest reports)
16	Herts Advertiser & St. Albans Times, Saturday 9th April, 1898 (contains report on School Board meeting of 4 <sup>th</sup> April)
17	Death certificate for Lily Bingham, issued 5 <sup>th</sup> April 1898