Robert Raikes tour: Information for tourist guides.
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From St. Michael's tower assemble on the Cross (buskers and market stalls permitting).

ANYONE who knows a bit about Gloucester's history will tell you that Robert Raikes started one of the world first newspapers, opened the world's first Sunday School and built Gloucester Prison.
WRONG..... for a very simple reason. There were two people called Robert Raikes, father and son, and if only Mr and Mrs Robert Raikes senior had called their most famous son Tom, Dick or Harry, or anything but Robert, it would have saved so much later confusion. Being father and son they overlapped each other chronologically and it takes care to establish which Robert Raikes said or did something.
Robert Raikes senior, born 1689, in Hessle, Humberside, was the pioneer journalist and printer who founded, edited and printed the Gloucester Journal which first appeared on the streets of Gloucester on April 9, 1722.
Robert Raikes junior, born in Gloucester 1736, was also the editor of the Journal, which, at one point in his stewardship, was the fourth biggest newspaper in the country, circulating in adjoining counties and South Wales. He didn't start the first Sunday School. What he did was make Sunday Schools a local, regional, national and international movement in his own lifetime. His great interest in crime and punishment, and the appalling conditions at Gloucester Castle jail, inspired his promotion of the construction in the 1790s of one of the world's first purpose designed prisons, much of which remains today.

SETTING THE SCENE. At this point I ask the assembled company two questions. How long was life expectancy in 1700? What proportion of the English population could read and write? The answers are 28 years and approximately 4 per cent.
Hopefully,with gasps of astonishment, we then establish which period of English history we are talking about (1689 to 1811) and who was supposed to be in charge.
Ostensibly the King was still in charge, but this was largely the era of the Georges 1,2,3 and 4, who had been imported from Germany, and, crucially, what ever else they were, they were definitely Protestants.
George 1 couldn't speak English and lived half the year in Germany: George 2 could speak English and was interested in the army and navy, George 3 was said to be mad. He wasn't, but he was poorly educated and suffered from the seriously disabling disease porphyria. George 4 ushered in a new era of drunkenness and debauchery. So who was really in charge? The answer: an unelected parliament and the magistracy.
There was no police force, local democracy, social security or health service. Cruel sports were rife and the magistrates ruled through hanging and transportation. There were still private armies. Thousands of people were being evicted from their homes in the countryside by the enclosure of land into great estates and were gathering in cities as the Industrial Revolution began.
Thomas Gainsborough painted fanciful pictures of social cohesion in a sylvan England, with the ruling class relaxing on their estates while happy peasants danced on the village green. The state of the common man and woman was probably more as depicted by William Hogarth in his famous cartoons of poverty, drunkenness and cruelty.
Historians seem to agree that the only piece of what we now call social legislation, enacted in the whole of the 18th century, was The Gin Act of 1751. This attempted to stop the lower orders killing themselves by making their own gin, and led to the institution of the public house, where the legislators thought gin production could be controlled. The upper classes drank wine and beer.

What of Gloucester at the start of the 1700s? Because of its strategic position at the lowest bridging point of the River Severn it appears to have recovered surprisingly well from the efforts of Charles II to destroy its walls and other large building as revenge for supporting Cromwell in the Civil War. New houses were being built and businesses established.
Meanwhile, in the vicarage at Hessle, the Rev. Timothy Raikes and his wife, Sarah, (who came from Gloucester) were celebrating, in 1689, the birth of their first son, Robert. He was one of seven of their 13 children who survived infancy. The family was very well connected in society. One of their relatives was William Wilberforce, the anti slavery campaigner. Their girls grew up to “marry well” and the boys had careers in the army, the church and business. Robert was rather different He was interested in the technology of the age -printing- and served a five year apprenticeship in London.
Following unsuccessful attempts to set up printing businesses in St Ives (Cambs) and in Northampton, perhaps it was mum who suggested he try Gloucester. He arrived in 1720, took premises in Northgate Street, opposite the New Inn, and found a ready demand for his services producing handbills, posters and other printed matter in the county town.
His great ambition to start a newspaper was realised two years later when the first edition of the weekly Gloucester Journal appeared containing local, regional, national and international news, some of it remarkably out of date by modern standards.
Raikes quickly established a radical form of journalism, including events which the ruling class didn't want published – such as food riots; children dying of starvation because farmers withheld grain from the market to force the price up. He reported strikes by textile workers in Stroud and raised money to support their families. He deplored the random hangings and deportations and fought against the attempts of the government to impose a crippling tax on newspapers. Paradoxically, for a man of such high ideals, his business was financed partly by paid advertisements for patent medicines making outrageous claims by their quack doctor inventors.
Raikes' lofty family connections stood him in good stead. So much so that he was able to obtain copies of the minutes of the Privy Council (the equivalent today of the cabinet) and he began to publish them in the Journal.
It wasn't long before he received a summons from the Palace of Westminster to answer a charge of bringing Parliament into disrepute.
What was it that so annoyed MPs? He had published something that couldn't be more topical today – the embarrassing state of the government's debts.
Raikes answered the summons; travelled to London, was arrested by the Sergeant at Arms, and detained until it was convenient for Parliament to convene. Thus he became the first journalist in Britain to be locked up for publishing something the Government didn't want the people to know.
Raikes was arraigned, on his knees, before the Speaker who fined him 40 guineas, the equivalent of £12,500 today. He seems to have paid up because he was released and returned to Gloucester, where, to his eternal credit, he continued to publish the minutes of the Privy Council. As a good journalist he had done his homework and discovered that there was no law saying newspapers could not publish the minutes.
When he received a second summons he called parliament's bluff and declined to attend. Sadly, history does not record whether his 40 guineas was returned.
Business was booming. In 1732 Raikes, and his third wife, Mary, moved from their modest accommodation to the splendour of Ladybellgate House in Longsmith Street,
where they produced some of their ten children, six of whom survived infancy.

AT THIS POINT WE MOVE FROM CROSS TO LADYBELLEGATE HOUSE.

Built in about 1704 for Henry Wagstaffe, of a well known family of Gloucester brewers, the house is probably the city's finest surviving town house. Mr Wagstaffe, who was Sheriff of

Gloucestershire in 1708, had a weakness for betting on horses; so much so that, when he died in 1725, his widow, Margaret was faced with paying off enormous gambling debts. So she let the family home to Raikes.
Robert junior appeared in 1736, and two other brothers were born there before their father decided in 1743 to concentrate his home and business together a few yards away at the much modified Blackfriars Priory.

USING OLD MAPS SHOW HOW THE HOUSE HAS BEEN MODIFIED AND PARTS OF THE PEDIMENT MOVED TO BEARLAND LODGE, A FEW YARDS FURTHER DOWN THE STREET. ALSO PICTURE OF FAMILY INCLUDING ROBERT JUNIOR AND HIS BROTHER THOMAS,WHO LATER BECAME GOVERNOR OF THE BANK OF ENGLAND AND WILLIAM, WHO BECAME DIRECTOR OF THE SOUTH SEA COMPANY.

Ladybellegate House contains beautiful ornamental plasterwork and was the town house of the Guise family of Elmore Court in the late eighteenth century. It became the Liberal Club in the 19th century, then the HQ of the Gloucester Friendly Society's Medical Association and subsequently the City Health Centre. It was sold to Post Office Telephones which threatened in 1972 to knock it down to enlarge the adjoining telephone exchange. Following a battle spearheaded by the newly formed Gloucester Civic Trust and supported by the City Council, planning permission was refused. The Trust bought the building for £1, raised more than £30,000 to stabilise and restore it, and sold it to a trust which specialised in finding new uses for old buildings. The money was rolled over into the restoration of St Nicholas House in Westgate Street.
Ladybellegate House is now owned and occupied by Sarah Keays and her daughter, Fiona, whose father is the late Lord Parkinson.

Robert Raikes senior died at the age of 68 in 1757 and the business was taken over by 21-year-old, Robert junior. He had attended both the King's School and the Crypt, but forwent a university education to use his experience of working with his father to modernise and expand the paper and its circulation.
One of his first tasks was to fight off another proposal by the government to put newspapers out of business by imposing punitive taxes. He described the move as “an attempt to subvert the liberty of the press.”
Business boomed with the economy and Raikes moved back to Ladybellegate House for five years while his new printing works and home in Southgate Street was being prepared. His mother remained at Blackfriars.
He raised huge sums of money to feed the poor and began to build a campaign for penal reform by reporting gallows confessions of those who were hung in public almost every day at three locations in Gloucester, for the most trivial offences. Some of the confessions were so eloquent it is difficult to believe they were not sub-edited by Raikes to drive home his conviction that the way to beat crime was by education and not hanging and transportation.
Thus his two great campaigns became: primary education for the poor and getting rid of the ghastly conditions at the tumbledown old medieval castle by the River Severn which served as the county jail. There, more people died of contagious diseases than were hung. Men and women were herded together and the governor earned his living by selling beer to the prisoners. The water was undrinkable. Criminals such as murderers, rapists and burglars were fed every other day, but debtors got no food at all. They had to be provisioned by their relatives bringing food to the castle where it was hoisted up the walls. Because of the ruinous state of the building it was easy to escape.
Raikes wanted a purpose built jail based on three principles – security, sanitation and separation. Inthe meantime he continued to visit the jail, and individual prisoners, at some

considerable risk to himself.
In 1777, John Howard (Howard League for Penal Reform) produced his famous report to Parliament on the state of the country's jails, with Gloucester coming third from bottom in the league table of dereliction. Raikes teamed up with Howard and the chairman of the County Magistrates, Sir George Onesiphorus Paul, to raise funds and promote a bill in Parliament. They engaged the architect, William Blackburn, to sit down with a clean sheet of paper and design a prison which met their criteria. Thus, each of the 207 prisoners had their own cell, men and women were separated, and a lazaretto built above the gatehouse to provide quarantine for new prisoners who might introduce horrible diseases to the rest of the inmates. By 1791 the money had been raised, the main prison blocks were built and occupied, but the perimeter wall had yet to be finished. The inevitable happened. Several prisoners escaped using builders' ladders and scaffolding. The second man to escape, John Cull, didn't get far. He was brought back by his wife who declared that John was better off in the new prison than with his family.

MOVE TO ROBERT RAIKES' HOUSE IN SOUTHGATE STREET.

In the late 1770's Raikes embarked on his campaign to bring primary education to the poor. He asked the vicar of St John's and St Mary de Crypt, Rev. Thomas Stock, to provide him with a list of “the 90 poorest and most neglected children in Gloucester.” These included the children who were sent up chimneys to clean them. They lived in “Sooty Alley” near the old castle.

In a letter to the Rochdale Magistrates, Raikes later described how he came to start his education campaign. He was in the St. Catharine area of the city one Sunday because he wanted to employ a new gardener, and he was appalled by the behaviour of the local children, who were “defiling the Sabbath” by fighting, cursing and swearing, stealing and generally misbehaving.

Many of the children were employed six days-a-week, 12 hours-a-day in the pin and needle making industry. Sunday was their only day off. Raikes could see it was going to be difficult to persuade the children to give up their Sundays to study. He embarked on what we would now call a public relations campaign. He interviewed all the parents, arguing that if their children learned to read and write they would get good jobs and have a happy life. He also interviewed all the likely pupils (girls as well as boys) and began to “sell” the idea to his own friends in business and commerce that an educated workforce would be good for the economy.

Raikes was much taken with the reported experiences of William King, who owned a mill near Dursley. King's Sunday School for his employees showed that learning to read and write made them much more efficient and productive. They could follow written instructions, record what they were doing and make lots more money for Mr King.

In 1780 Raikes set up his first four schools in Gloucester. He insisted that the teachers came from the communities they served and that the schools were small and held in local houses. Raikes and Stock vetted the teachers and acted as inspectors. Soon there were 12 schools, then 20, teaching, at first, just reading, cleanliness and “good manners.” There were problems with attendance and discipline. The pupils were a tough bunch, filthy dirty and foul mouthed. Some parents had to drive their children to school with sticks; others had large weights attached to their legs to stop them running away.

The school day was; lessons in the morning followed by attendance at a service in one of the city centre churches. Then home for lunch (if they had any) and back in the afternoon for more schooling. Raikes solved the problem of non-attendance after lunch in a novel way. He introduced a school uniform. Each morning the children would remove their outer

coats and don a linen smock. Their coats were locked away in a cupboard during lessons and the church services. They had to come back in the afternoon to collect their coats at the end of the day.

Corporal punishment was administered to offenders, occasionally by Raikes himself. Pupils telling lies were treated harshly. As Raikes famously remarked: “Liars are worse than thieves.”

In 1783 Raikes felt confident enough with progress to publish the scholastic results in the Gloucester Journal. The article “went viral,” in modern parlance, and was re-printed in other newspapers and gentlemen's magazines of the period. Inquiries flooded into Gloucester from all over the nation – particularly the burgeoning industrial towns. By 1789 there were 746 Sunday Schools nationwide, teaching more than 50,000 poor children.

Meanwhile, another Gloucestershire businessman, William Fox, who had made a fortune in the wholesale grocery trade in London, had set up the Sunday School Society to promote the movement countrywide with Robert Raikes junior as its president. The organisation subsequently changed its name to the Sunday School Union – still flourishing today.

It is estimated that between 1780 and 1876 something like 8 million children in Britain alone had learned to read and write at Sunday Schools, providing the literate workforce for the industrial and commercial success of the Victorian era, both at home and in the British empire.

What was the government doing about providing universal primary schooling? Precious little. Parliament's first debate on the subject was in 1811 (ironically the year that Robert Raikes Jnr died) and it took another 65 years for the Education Act to make primary education compulsory.

What about the nation's religious organisations? The Church of England, which at that time was almost the state religion, was against the foundation of Sunday Schools. Children simply needed to go to church on Sundays, and that was quite sufficient. But the C of E soon changed its mind when Queen Charlotte, the wife of George III, invited Raikes to Windsor Castle to tell her all about his campaign. Afterwards she publically declared her support for Sunday Schools and in an extraordinary about-face the C of E fell into line, with the Bishop of Gloucester one of the new converts.

John Wesley, leader of the new Methodists, was all in favour of educating the poor, remarking: “ I find these schools springing up wherever I go.” Despite this endorsement Raikes was never tempted to forsake the Church of England though he often had harsh words for some of its supporters. In a famous editorial in the Journal he was scathing about a Prof. White of Oxford University who proposed that large sums of the church's wealth be devoted to converting millions of Hindus and Moslems in the Indian sub continent to Christianity. Raikes countered thus. If Prof White wants some missionary work done he should start, not in India, but the Forest of Dean!

The Sunday Schools soon began to teach writing as well as reading, but this required serious sums of capital investment in writing materials, slates, pens, books, blackboards. Raikes decided to tap the wealth of his friends. He would organise a soiree at his newly enlarged Southgate Street home, having carefully placed a number of ragged urchins around the garden. When his guests went into the garden they were astonished to find the urchins reading aloud from the New Testament or the Prayer Book. Some could hardly believe this was possible, but Raikes reassured them it was and thus received considerable sums of money for the Sunday Schools.

That same garden, which now forms the beer garden of the Robert Raikes House pub,

was the venue for the first ever Sunday School treats. Provided they could be scrubbed clean, star pupils would be invited to the house and congratulated on their achievements, receiving a slice of Mrs Raikes' famous plum cake, and a whole penny.

Having got the backing of the Queen, the Church and his own class, could anything go wrong for his campaign? Almost. As the century progressed the British establishment became increasingly panicked by events in France, where the revolution was decimating the ruling aristocracy and creating a new order. The Napoleonic wars made things worse as thousands of British troops were in France learning first hand how to run a revolution.

In a panic the Government suspended Habeus Corpus, closed reading rooms, and banned meetings of more than three people. Prime Minister Pitt proposed a bill which would have closed Sunday Schools as being “seditious.” but fortunately it never got on the Statute Book.

Raikes' response was not less education - but more. He began promoting evening classes for adults and backed those few employers who began schools within their industrial enterprises.

Despite this advanced thinking he was far from being any sort of revolutionary. He remained very much part of the establishment he was born into. He dressed in the latest fashion, had a three row wig, tricorn hat, cutaway coat, satin breeches and silver embellished shoes and cane when he ventured out. Because of his perceived weird views on educating the poor and penal reform, he was known on the streets of Gloucester, as “Bobby Wildgoose”.

Some idea of Raikes' status in the community can be gained from the fact that fashionable visitors to Gloucester during the period would include in their itinerary visits to the Mayor, the Bishop and Mr Raikes, the printer. In 1788 Fanny Burney, the fashionable diarist, called in and was royally entertained but unimpressed describing him as “too flourishing, too forward and too voluable.”

She described Raikes' daughters as “common sorts of country misses.” She got that wrong because two of them married admirals, one an army colonel, another, a general, and a fifth wed a director of the South Sea Company. One of Raikes' sons became the vicar of Longhope, and the other a colonel in the Coldstream Guards.

But every reformer has their limits. In 1791 Thomas Paine published his famous pamphlet “The Rights of Man” which defended the principles of the French Revolution and actually suggested that parliament should be elected by a universal franchise. It was the most widely read political treatise of the decade. One man, one vote? This was too much for Raikes. He joined the clamour against Paine, using the Gloucester Journal. In one extraordinary report he described how the villagers of Birdlip organised a march against Paine's proposals and burned an effigy of him on the village green!

In 1802 Raikes decided it was time for him to retire. None of his children was interested in the editorship of the Journal. He sold it to the Hereford Times and went to live in Bell Lane (now Bell Walk). In 1811 he suffered a heart attack at the age of 74 and died within the day. His funeral was a huge event in Gloucester. The cortege was followed by all the pupils of the then Sunday Schools plus many others who had benefited from his schools. He was laid to rest alongside his father in St. Mary-de-Crypt Church, Southgate Street. The pupils were then treated in the garden in Southgate St. to a slice of Mrs Raikes' plum cake …... and sixpence.

At around that date there were 500,000 poor children learning to read and write in Sunday Schools in Britain alone..... a fitting epitaph for a life well lived.

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