

George Dixon

He was mayor of Victorian Birmingham and a Liberal councillor, resigning the mayoralty to seek and win election to Parliament. He cut his teeth in the campaign to secure a free elementary education for all.

This sounds for all the world like the introduction to a biography of Joseph Chamberlain. It could be exactly that, but in this case it is the story of another man entirely.

George Dixon was one of 19th-century Birmingham's most significant and influential figures. He was a councillor and mayor, chairman of the School Board, Freeman of the City, and represented the borough as an MP for 22 years, until his death in 1898. Yet even his biographer, who also happens to be Dixon's great-great-grandson, is happy to admit that George "has left few footprints on the sands of history".

Politicians of national standing were not thin on the ground in Victorian Birmingham, and Dixon was in his lifetime, and has been ever since, overshadowed by the larger-than-life figures who shared many a rostrum with him, men like Joe Chamberlain and John Bright. Shy and retiring he was not, yet Dixon's influence was altogether less confrontational, and at times probably more effective, than theirs.

An 1886 Birmingham cartoon of a "political beauty show" flags up the contrast all too clearly. It shows all three men, dressed in their posh frocks and waiting for an invitation to dance. Bright is here described as "aged and grumpy", Chamberlain as of "uncertain temper", while Dixon is labelled as "very easy natured" and willing to "do anything for a quiet life".

Charlotte Bronte, no less, was one of the first to identify what she saw as a character defect in the young George, when she met him in Brussels in 1843. "Apparently constructed without a back-bone", she commented dryly.

James Dixon's recently published biography, *Out of Birmingham: George Dixon (1820-98), Father of Free Education*, Brewin Books, 2013, is a worthy attempt to move the bushel that has so long hidden our George, and to straighten the record a little. And certainly we know the man a great deal better from James Dixon's careful and sympathetic portrait.

So, given that there is no Dixon Square or Dixon Fountain in Birmingham, nor a statue or memorial to the man, where might one go to appreciate his enduring influence in the city he called home for sixty years ?

You could start at Augustus Road, Edgbaston, where George Dixon lived for almost all his Birmingham life. The Dales was not only the family home, but also something of a campaign headquarters too; Dixon's lavish dinner parties were legendary, and provided subtle ways for him to recruit allies and organise consensus.

Alternatively, you might look across the road from the Library of Birmingham. On the corner of Bridge Street and Broad Street stood the premises of Rabone Brothers, long established export merchants, whose firm George and his brother, Abraham, had joined as young men. It was this work that brought the family down from Yorkshire, and at length the Dixons took over the running of the firm.

That corner of Bridge Street has a fascinating tale to tell.

In 1847, when John Cadbury was seeking to expand his chocolate business, it was to premises at Bridge Street, owned by Rabone Bros, that he moved. As James Dixon

points out, Cadbury and Dixon made interesting neighbours, one Quaker, the other Anglican; one a pacifist, the other exporting guns for use in the American Civil War. Not long after the Cadburys moved out to Bournville, Dixon had their former factory converted into a pioneering technical school. The Birmingham School Board opened the Bridge Street Seventh Standard in 1884, renting the premises from Dixon for a nominal sum. As Dixon declared at the time: "All are now agreed that if this country is to retain its commercial supremacy it is essential that our artisans should have that training and education which will best fit them for the workshop. We are seeking to carry out this idea in the Bridge Street School."

Bridge Street closed in 1898, when a new Higher Grade School opened at Oozells Street. And that school, appropriately, bore the name of George Dixon, as it still does today.

Finally, there is George Dixon's grave, which lies in a deserted corner of Witton cemetery, overlooking the M6. Here he was laid to rest in January 1898 beside his wife, Mary, who pre-deceased him by thirteen years. It was to look after Mary that George walked away from Westminster for ten years, before resuming his seat after her death.

But it is in all those hundreds of Birmingham schools that George Dixon's legacy principally lies. As co-founder of the Birmingham Education Society, leader of the National Education League, and chair of the Birmingham School Board, Dixon fought – for half his life – to secure a free and non-sectarian education for all.

There were, in this, as many battles lost as won. What should have been the culmination of the crusade – William Forster's Elementary Education Act of 1870 - was itself a delicate and unsatisfactory compromise between the conflicting claims of Church and State. Dixon led the campaign to have the legislation updated, that is, to make schooling compulsory and to make it free. It took a further twenty years to get to that position.

It is this battle that takes centre stage in James Dixon's biography. The book lays bare the unedifying struggles between strong opinions and even stronger personalities. George Dixon's was far from the "quiet life" it might have looked to outsiders.