

The family stayed a few weeks in London, then after taking advice from friends moved to Cheltenham which had the attractions of good society and good schools. Cheltenham Ladies' College, where the famous Miss Beale was head, was one of the top girls' schools in England and one of the largest, with almost five hundred pupils. Al and Fan coped satisfactorily, a tribute to their mother's teaching. Agnes, the brightest of the seven, began in the kindergarten but was soon promoted to the main school, where she was the youngest pupil.

The boys attended Cheltenham College, which was never as famous as the girls' school. They settled in less easily than their sisters.

Health quickly became a problem. The isolated existence which the girls — and Harry — had led made them vulnerable to infectious diseases once they started school. Fanny was asthmatic and there was fear of tuberculosis. After a few months she was sent to Bournemouth which has a better climate than Cheltenham. She went to school there and lived in a boarding-house for schoolgirls, which must have been an exemplary establishment since Mrs Bennett had nothing but praise for it.

Mr Bennett's letters rolled on steadily. Long, laborious, with the last pages usually crossed, they must have presented difficulties to his wife, who had to try to carry out his directions and respond to his changing ideas. He had definite views on education but a limited understanding of the way that schools worked. Mrs Bennett had to tell him more than once that you could not order the subjects you wanted; you took what schools offered.

Both parents faced hardships. We may suppose that they missed each other, although he wrote of missing the children much more than of missing her. He spent his spare time in visiting people with whom Mrs Bennett and the girls corresponded; sometimes he made copies of the letters these people had received from them. He took great care of his own letters from the family, eventually giving Frank, the oldest son, a separate file. He led a cheerless existence, camping out in a room or two and looked after by a handyman. Since he could not return hospitality, he seldom accepted it. Over his bed he hung a spade of Harry's and two hats of the older boys. But he did not pine away; his weight rose from fifteen and a half stone to nearly eighteen.

Mrs Bennett was faced with heavy responsibilities; she had to choose houses and schools and justify her choices to her husband. She had to itemise her expenditure carefully. I doubt if she washed a cup or peeled a potato (though she helped to put out a fire) but she was busy. Harry did not go to school and she kept him with her most of the time. She heard the lessons of the other six children and supervised their homework. The girls were with her most afternoons, since they had the short hours typical of nineteenth century girls' private schools. She shopped for the children's clothes, repaired and refashioned them. She