School buildings in Sheffield

The Education Act of 1870 made school attendance compulsory for all children, and coincided with a period of rapid growth in the population of Sheffield. The Sheffield School Board got to work as soon as it was created, and by 1872 had constructed its first school at Broomhill, in the west of the city. Other schools followed in quick succession and the Board selected competent architects, who chose to build in high quality stone, most of which was sourced locally, with only the slate for the roofs coming from Wales or the Lake District. In 1875, this policy was criticised by MP David Chadwick, from the south of England, “The School Board have persuaded the ratepayers of Sheffield to tolerate the extravagance of spending £100,000 in the building of schools as substantial as castles”. However, the outcome was that the city had a series of 64 well-built sturdy schools, 46 of which still survive, and 28 of these are still functioning as schools, albeit now with inside toilets and other later refinements!

When the City Council took over responsibility for school buildings before the First World War, it continued the policy of building in stone for a time, and only in the mid-20th Century did concrete and glass take precedence. Many of these later buildings proved inadequate and have since been replaced.

Most of the documentary evidence for the origin of the building stones has been gleaned from newspaper cuttings of the time and has been compiled into a recent book by the Victorian Society, “Building schools for Sheffield” (2012).

Most school buildings were constructed from various Coal Measures sandstones, from within the city boundaries, supplemented by stone from the Kinderscout Grit at Stoke Hall, near Grindleford. Broomhill School proves to be an exception, with stone being recorded as being of “Dunford Hill stone with Handsworth ashlar”. If Dunford Hill relates to the hamlet of Dunford Bridge, it is about 15 miles away, as the crow flies, compared to about 5 miles from Handsworth. The Huddersfield White Rock, of Namurian age, crops out at Dunford Bridge. The Handsworth stone is from large quarries (now a housing estate) in the “Barnsley Rock” on the east side of the city. The photographs show the differences between the stone making up the bulk of the walls and the smooth ashlar of the corners and sills.

Broomhill School, Beech Hill Road, Sheffield, 10. Detail of stone wall and ashlar sill

“Sheffield School Board, A.D. 1872” – and proud of it!
Details of the building materials for the majority of stone-built schools in Sheffield are rather sparse, but there seems to have been a preference for stone from the Bole Hill Quarries at Crookes/Walkley Bank, e.g. Greystones School, opened in June 1904. The Sheffield Telegraph at the time reported, “The buildings are faced all round with rock-faced stone from the Bole Hill Quarries, with ashlar stone dressing from Mr Turner’s quarries at Stoke”. (i.e. Stoke Hall Quarries at Grindleford).
Note: We do need to be careful in assuming that “Bole Hill” means the Bole Hill Quarries at Crookes. A bole hill was any hill where smelting had been carried out, using the topography to gain a good draught for the furnace. By their very nature, hills are mostly composed of stronger rocks, such as sandstones, than their surroundings, and “Bole Hills” at Treeton and Wingerworth near Chesterfield also hosted sandstone quarries. However, in this case, the buff-coloured medium-grained sandstone of the building matches that of the quarries at Crookes. Indeed, it is a very familiar stone in many of the buildings of Sheffield, once the grime of the past has been cleaned off or has weathered away. It comes from the Crawshaw Sandstone, of Lower Coal Measures age. The quarries at Crookes were once very extensive, although the faces have now been graded and landscaped.

Briefly, the importance of the Crawshaw Sandstone from Bole Hill or Walkley Bank in school buildings can be seen from the list of schools where the building materials are known, from press reports at the time:

Ranmoor School, 1904, ‘Bole Hill stone and Matlock ashlar’;
Hammerton Road School, Damall, 1904, ‘Bole Hill stone with Stoke ashlar dressings’;
Woodside School, 1880-81, (now demolished), ‘Walkley stone and Grenoside ashlar’;
Duchess Rd School, 1883, (now demolished), of ‘local Walkley stone’;
Neepsend School, 1896, (now demolished), ‘stone from the local Bole Hill quarries’
The imposing complex of former school and college buildings on Leopold Street (1870s – 1890s) seems to be an odd one out, being constructed of “Huddersfield stone”!

Outside Sheffield itself, the National School at Greasborough was built of Greenmoor Rock, and opened in 1888.

References
Sheffield Independent 28th December 1888
Sheffield Archives and Local Studies Library for the photograph and business card of Handsworth Quarries.

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