

Foundation and early years of Longcot and Fernham Primary School

Introduction

In the 1860's there was growing pressure for schools to be provided where none existed. At this time the problem was that religious societies had a vested interest in the education of children and conflict arose over how schools would be funded. In 1869 the National Education League was formed and led a campaign for free, compulsory, non-religious education for all children. Industrialists who were of the opinion that education was vital in maintaining the nation's ability to excel in manufacturing provided considerable support to discussion in Parliament. A Bill which addressed many of the issues was introduced by W.E.Forster, and was passed as the 1870 Education Act.

How did this affect children and families in Longcot and Fernham?

In 2004, in searching for the original Trust Deeds for Longcot & Fernham School a number of documents were found in the National Archive in Kew. Unfortunately the original deeds were not found.

These documents were probably from the files of the Berkshire Education Department, and cover the period between October 1871 and December 1911. They mainly consist of correspondence between the school managers and teaching staff and the Education Department.

The passing of the Education Act required the provision of education for children aged 5 to 12 years. Local authorities were required to make returns of the number of children in their area and the existing provision of schooling. Census data was also used to assess the number of children of school age.

What follows comprises extracts from a selection of the documents found in the 2004 search, together with some explanatory comments.

The Correspondence

Transcriptions of the original, mainly handwritten, documents are given in italics, comments in upright text.

1870s

The archive documents begin with forms completed in 1871 for Longcot. The Parish of Longcot had 494 inhabitants, of whom 445 were *'of the class whose children were expected to attend elementary school'*. It was considered that there was a deficiency in this District and school accommodation should be provided for 89 children. There was also a requirement for 20 children from Fernham, and it was decided to combine the two districts.

The recommendation was that *'the proposed school must be built in or close to the village of Longcot, without delay, to accommodate all the children of Longcot and the elder ones of Fernham, distant 1¹/₂ miles'*.

'Suitable instruction is to be provided or else a school board must be formed and the school built on the rates'.

For the hamlet of Fernham, another form concluded that schooling was required for 24 children. *'A hamlet school with suitable instruction for infants and young children should be provided'*. The older children would go to Longcot when the new school was built.

At this time there was a 'dame school' in Fernham, but in the form no mention is made of its existence.

In September 1872 a notification was posted in the Faringdon Advertiser regarding the uniting of the townships of Longcot and Fernham into one school district.

Reverend John Hughes, living in Longcot, was vicar of both Longcot and Fernham churches at this time. The new school would be a Church of England school and he became Correspondent and Chairman of the School Managers Committee. Detailed correspondence between him and the Education Department concerns the plans for the new building in Longcot. Also mentioned are plans for a new infants' school in Fernham, to be erected before the end of October 1874.

In a letter from John Hughes in June 1874, a form for the Preliminary Statement for Longcot School was accompanied by the information that *'the school has been at work under a Certificated master since April 20 with 120 names on the register'*.

In February 1876, the Fernham school appears to be furnished and a teacher appointed.

In July 1876 Her Majesty's Inspector reported a problem with the ability of the mistress of the Fernham school, and she is ruled unfit according to the present standard for infant schools. *'There is no other female in the village who could hope in any the least degree to satisfy Her Majesty's Inspector'*.

It is possible that this mistress was a resident of the village and had been the teacher in the small 'dame school'. According to John Hughes, if the Managers advertised for a replacement there would be little to attract any applicant.

'The salary which would be met from village rates would not be sufficient and there is no house or family with whom she could reside. The material is so rough that it would be next to impossible to induce a Certificated Mistress to undertake the task, except by offering a salary which would appear to the Managers, altogether disproportionate to the work required, and which they hardly know how they can possibly raise. The Managers of the School District have had since 1871 to raise between £900 and £1000 for building expenses at Longcot and Fernham. They could not have done this except that they were allowed by the Local Government to devote the proceeds of the sale of certain Parish property to School Purposes the consequence of this being that they in Longcot could apply for a building and application for a building grant at Fernham they suppose is 'fallen through'.

It is the pressure of building, embarking, maintaining schools all falling in one heap on the district at once, which has made it necessary for the Managers to endeavour to economise as much as possible and so to provide a mistress at Fernham for the 20 infants at as low a salary as possible. If however it be the final judgement of the Education Department that they must have a certificated Mistress (if they can obtain one) the Managers hope that they may get some considerable help from a Government grant'.

The Education Department response was *'that although the Inspector reported that all instruction given in the Fernham School was quite without value they do not wish to bear heavily upon a Parish which has likely spent a great deal of money in providing schools and are therefore willing to allow Fernham another chance until the next year.'* Reverend Hughes undertakes to do his best by introducing a timetable and providing means for teaching lessons. He also mentions that children over 8 years old will go to Longcot School.

1897 - 1911

About 20 years later, in December 1897, the correspondence implies that the school in Fernham has been closed. A letter from Mr William Bray, a village resident, was sent to the Education Department:

'Gentlemen,

I am writing to ask if anything can be done towards establishing a school in this village. There are from 26 to 30 children and we have to send them to Longcot to school which is a one and a quarter mile and very cold road which I think is very cruel for the infants who have to walk so far of a cold and frosty morning. There is a very nice school in this village with good yard but our vicar has now turned it into a coffee room. Children get wet in the morning should the rain come on and then have to sit in their wet clothes all day which gives them bad colds and they have to lose so much time. It would not matter so much for the children that is in the standards but it is the infants. Trusting you will pay attention to it,

I am Gentlemen your obediently,

William Bray'

Before responding to this letter, E. Holmes, Her Majesty's Inspector requests an accurate census to be made of the number of children in Fernham. The vicar of the two parishes, Reverend Robert Thompson, conducted this and found that there were 27 children of whom 8 are under 5 years of age.

The following was written as a departmental note:

'If there were a genuine demand on the part of the people of Fernham for a separate school I think it ought to receive most careful consideration. But as it happens W. Bray the writer of the letter to the department is the Fernham Publican thus making reference to the coffee house with disfavour! The Fernham children who are over 5 years all go to Longcot School and attend very regularly.

I would suggest that nothing shall be done at present but that if the child population increases or if a genuine demand for a separate school springs up at Fernham the question should be reopened. The school building at Longcot is very large'.

In March 1898 a very well written 'protest' letter from Longcot was sent to the Education Department. The letter was written by May Hughes as Correspondent

for the Longcot School Managers and Subscribers, and was a protest against Mr Bray's suggestion of a school in Fernham. It states that *'the Longcot School has more than ample accommodation, attendance by the Fernham children is excellent and that any alteration of the present system would most seriously diminish their funds.'* It points out that *'Longcot is a poor village: there is no squire and very considerable sacrifices have been made by the parishioners to find money for school purposes.'*

This was accompanied by a more personal letter from May Hughes, as a teacher at the school and a District Councillor, pointing out the migratory character of the village population. Maybe the underlying issue was conflict between the interests of Mr Bray, publican, and Rev Thompson, vicar. Also, if there was a school in Fernham this could affect the finances of Longcot School.

The Education Department decided to close the matter unless further evidence arose to support the need for a separate school in Fernham. Mr Bray was very concerned at the lack of response from the authorities.

In March 1904 there is concern about Longcot and Fernham School. After a visit by the Inspector, a special report was sent to the School Authorities.

'The School is in an inefficient state. The discipline is bad, the arithmetic exercises have not been honestly marked and the oral lessons are not properly prepared. During Needlework lessons the Infant teacher has to instruct all the older girls as well as three classes of Infants in a room which the Infants alone fill. This must cease at once, and it is essential that at all times the Infant teacher should have some assistance. Neither of the rooms is sufficiently warmed and the Infant room is ill lighted. The offices are unsatisfactory in position and structure and drainage and the boys are in a discreditable condition. Both sets are accessible to the public. The boy's cloakroom is without light or ventilation and the girls and Infants is inadequate. The pegs in latter need rearrangement. There is no lavatory. If the grass plot adjacent to the school is school property it should be enclosed and properly surfaced for drill.'

Another report states that:

'The school has suffered considerably during the past year through having no settled Head teacher and has been left for the whole year with the exception of 3 weeks with an insufficient staff. Under such conditions it is scarcely surprising that the attainments of the children are much lower than they should be, and the discipline somewhat lax. The arrangement by which the Infant Teacher takes

needlework of the upper school , leaving the infants to the care of 2 of the older girls is of course most unsatisfactory. The teacher manages the Infants pleasantly, and maintains very fair discipline, but it is impossible for her to instruct 3 classes without help, such assistance is imperative. Two of the desks are badly broken and their present condition are dangerous’.

By November 1905, with new teachers things have improved but there are still a few issues to be resolved such as record keeping, provision of equipment and re-decorating of rooms.

Unfortunately in May 1907 there are more problems. This time with the Headmaster:

‘Continued negligence is shown by the Headmaster. He does not duly supervise the Infant rooms, his oral lessons are not properly prepared and all lacking in spirit and intelligence, he has again been most remiss in the keeping of records and has again failed to report upon the terminal examinations.

The defects in the premises previously noted still continue.’

In October 1907 a new Headmaster has been appointed and the building defects are being addressed and it is hoped that the condition of the school will improve. Things do improve although apparatus is still needed for needlework, there are no boot scrapers, the playground needs a better surface and there is an unpleasant smell pervading the rooms!

In December 1911 an increase in numbers of scholars caused by changes of population at Michaelmas meant that the Infants room was overfull. The Education Secretary suggested that the use of a small unrecognised classroom should be approved by the Managers. This was agreed for use by 20 scholars but work was required to improve heating and ventilation.

The final letter in the search confirmed the change and was accompanied by a note that the total number of scholars in the school will be 136.