

## Extract from Longcot A Village in the Vale

### School Days

For nearly 300 years the school has been at the heart of the village, not only for education but also as the social centre of the community. The first school was built in the churchyard in 1717 by voluntary subscription, evidence of a sizeable population in the village that could afford a school. Pupils were sons of farmers who paid fees of one penny a week for the master to teach their children and the School was financed from fees, subscriptions and money from church collections on Feast days. The Master's salary depended on the school income, but was unlikely to be more than £25 per year.

Few records remain, but we do know that in 1784 there were 25 boys at school under Mr Heavens the Master. Richard Heavens was Master for 36 years as well as Parish Clerk for 44 years. Two stories have been passed down about those school days, which give an idea of the time. As there was no clock in the schoolroom, a stick in the ground outside the door was used as a sundial to tell the time. The boys went home for lunch each day, but before class ended, a pupil was sent out to buy a quart of beer for the schoolmaster

The small stone school building stood on the south side of the church, in the corner near the Fernham Road. It had a single room measuring 22ft by 17ft, with an inscription over the fireplace that read, 'This house was erected for the perpetual use of a Charity school in the year of our Lord 1717 by the charitable contributions of the gentlemen and clergy in this neighbourhood and of the inhabitants of this village and Fernham'. When the school closed in 1874, the building continued to be used as a church meeting room until the Parochial Church Council agreed that it be pulled down and the stone used for enlarging the church wall. The upkeep of the old building was expensive, and at that time there was an urgent need for funds to buy land to the east of the church to extend the burial ground, so sadly the old school was demolished in 1952 at a cost of £59.9.0

It was to be one hundred and thirty years after the Charity School was built, before a school for girls opened in the village. The vicar, Archdeacon Berens, gave the cottage and garden by the church gate to be used as a girls' school as a parting gift to the village in 1847 when Longcot became a parish in its own right. When the girls' school closed, the cottage was used as the head teacher's house and was eventually sold as a private house, now called Sagina.

Education remained voluntary and fee paying, until 1870 when The Education Act introduced compulsory education for all children from the age of 5 to 14 years. The village urgently needed a new school to accommodate all the children who now had to go to school by law, and in 1874 a new church school was built opposite The Green for the children of Longcot and Fernham. There were two classrooms in the school and when the school opened, one master was expected to teach all 112 scholars, as they were known. From time to time an unqualified assistant teacher was employed, but finding and keeping staff was a problem, as they had to travel from other villages, and were often unreliable, so older children were employed as monitors to keep discipline.

‘Rough and Vigorous Types’ was a description of some pupils in an Inspectors Report on the school, so not surprisingly introducing compulsory education into this agricultural community was very difficult, as we can see from entries in the School Logs, Attendance Records and School Managers’ Minutes that have survived. The first schoolmaster, Mr Mitchell, had a hard time raising standards and keeping discipline. Many of the children had not been to school before and were at a very low standard. Frequently they were absent, and the children from the village of Fernham particularly, since they had to walk the three miles between the villages, stayed away whenever the weather was bad. Many parents did not believe education was important and kept their children at home to help with the work. Records show low attendance during harvest, gleaning, haymaking, and potato planting and digging, and on Fridays, the girls stayed home to help prepare dairy produce ready for market on Saturday.

The number of pupils on the roll reveals the changing character of the village. When the school opened the canal trade was at its height with over 100 children on the roll. The registers show an ever changing population made up of children of agricultural workers who moved in search of work, and many itinerant and seasonal workers who came to the area. As the canal business decreased, the school figures dropped sharply. They dropped further with the decline in agricultural work and the effects of the First World War.

### **Teachers and Managers, Good and Bad**

A number of curriculum subjects were taught, the main lessons of course being reading, writing and arithmetic, but history, geography, art and music were also included, and a visiting drillmaster took physical education in the playground once a week. As a church school, Scripture was important, and a separate Diocesan Inspection took place twice a year when the children were tested on their knowledge of the Bible.

From the beginning of compulsory education, a rigorous inspection system was introduced and the Government Inspector visited regularly to scrutinise attendance records and test children on reading and writing. The school income was directly affected by recommendation of the Inspector, who had authority to close a school in extreme cases. His visits increased when standards were poor or absenteeism high, and he demanded action from the School Managers on all matters of concern. He also issued the important Certificates of Labour to children at 14 years if he considered them ready to leave school.

Absenteeism continued to be a problem, often due to illness. The logbooks record many epidemics of whooping cough and measles particularly, which resulted in the school closing sometimes for several weeks. Interestingly school nurses were employed from the earliest days, and they visited school frequently, mainly to examine the children for head lice and skin diseases, but they also made home visits and reported back to school on health and any other family problems.

The responsibilities of the School Managers were formalised in 1898 under the New Code for Managers, part of which read, *‘The School Board is held responsible by the Department of Education for the conduct of the school, the maintenance of efficiency, and for the provision of all needful furniture, books and apparatus’*. As a church school, the Vicar was Chairman of Managers, and the Minutes show meetings were mainly concerned with finance,

maintenance of the school and the house provided for the head teacher. The managers were required to act on the recommendations of the Inspector and many of their problems in the early days concerned staff.

By 1900 Mrs Mary Hannah Hughes was Headmistress and the school was doing well. The Inspector reported that the children were quiet, well behaved, and well grounded in elementary subjects. However four years later Mrs Hughes had left, and a disastrous period followed. School numbers were rising, and there was overcrowding and poor attendance. A succession of temporary Head Teachers, with one dismissed for drunkenness, resulted in frequent inspections. One Inspector's report read *'The discipline and organisation of this school leave much to be desired. There is a great deal of talking among the children and some copying. It seems clear that the school is not being conducted with due industry and energy. Unless there is a great improvement in these matters the higher scale of grant under Article 105 cannot again be recommended'*.

The inspector was also concerned at the lack of action by the Managers in dealing with an incompetent Headmaster, and the poor condition of the premises. Eventually the Managers dismissed the Head Teacher who ended his term of office with a strange entry in the Log, following a school stock check by the Education Officer. *'Since counting the reading books at the beginning of the week and entering the number in the stock book I find one from each of five sets missing. I can only think that someone got in through an open window at the back of the school while I went home to tea leaving the books on the desks to be replaced in the evening. As I shall not come in contact with the school again I have no opportunity of discovering the thief'*.

School fortunes improved with the arrival of Daniel Bird as Head Master, and his wife as assistant teacher. They brought stability and improved standards, but continued to have plenty of problems, which, the inspector noted, Mr Bird 'energetically grapples with'. There followed a twenty-year period when Mrs Drew was head teacher. When she became Head Mistress in 1918, she introduced new activities; the boys went to Bourton for woodwork, and the girls to Faringdon for cookery. Amazingly at first the children walked to these classes, and only later a horse and cart was used. Mrs Drew was a strict disciplinarian, and Hilda Reason, who lived all her life in the village, remembered several confrontations, particularly when she had played truant to follow the hunt.

In 1939 Longcot and Fernham School became a Primary School for children from 5-11 years, and the older children went to Faringdon Senior School. This change brought benefits in smaller, more manageable classes, and an advertisement for a new head teacher in 1940 attracted eight good applicants. The person chosen was offered the position *'on account of her references, ableness and youth, also as she was willing to live in the parish, if she could reside in Church Cottage after her marriage'*. This was an opportunity for the Managers to reclaim Church Cottage for the school. A dispute had arisen in 1935 when the Managers found that the old girls' school was to be sold and solicitors were quickly instructed to draw up legal documents to return the cottage to School use, 'as it was now required for the school mistress.'

### **Cold, Damp and Condemned**

From the records it is obvious that 25 years after it was built, the school was a very

inhospitable building. Over the years there are constant references to cracked walls, smoke filled classrooms, and cold and damp. Inefficient heating was a major problem, and in November 1910, the inspector adds a chart of the temperature in the classroom to his report, taken daily for two weeks. The temperature in the classroom at 8.50 a.m. ranged from 40° Fahrenheit minimum to 52° F maximum.

In very bad winters the children were often sent to play in the fields to keep warm. In 1920 the temperature in school was recorded as low as 25°F and the infants were crying with the cold. Another year the log reads '*The school has been too cold for children to work. All ink frozen in the ink-wells and children have used pencils all week.*'

The building was condemned by the County Surveyor for educational purposes in 1949, but was not replaced until 1969, probably due to post war building restrictions and falling school numbers. People still talk of the old school, and despite the poor conditions of the building were sorry to see it pulled down. Everyone seems to remember the old school stove. Stan Hutchings, who lives on the Green, used to help haul the milk crates inside to stand by the stove so the milk would thaw in time for mid-morning break. But perhaps Stan's affection for the building is more to do with his courting days in the old school porch!

After the First World War, the fuel shortage was desperate, and the School Log records gifts of wood and coal from villagers to keep the stove alight, and the first three deliveries of coal in October to December were so vital they were recorded.

With so many school log entries recording epidemics and freezing winters it is reassuring to read of some happy days and good times. An annual event was the outing to Ringdale in Fernham, when the children went '*to partake of tea at Mrs Paine's, to play in her park and to receive a present before departing at 6.30 p.m.*'. The school sports day was held at the Vicarage, and the Vicar regularly declared a half day holiday, or time off for the children to go to the meet of the local Hunt.

In 1940, children from a London School, known as Cubitt Town School were evacuated to the village, with a teacher. Some of the children were under five, and a separate Infant class was set up for them in the Ark, the wooden building in the Dash. To begin with, the influx caused problems. The children were not integrated into the school, but taught in a separate class where a curtain was used to divide the room into two parts, Longcot Juniors being one side and Cubitt Town the other.

It took time for some of the London children to settle down to life in the country, and there was trouble that ended with damage to the school, and the Managers claimed costs for a repair to the Ark. What the damage was is not detailed in the minute book, but perhaps it was an incident remembered by villagers today, when the London children rounded up the goats and ducks from the Green and put them in the Ark over night.

In the 1960s the number of pupils on the roll had fallen to just over 30, and the closure of the school had been discussed for several years. Various plans were put forward for moving the children first to Uffington School and later Shellingford School. Little Coxwell School closed at this time, and with a condemned building and low pupil numbers, Longcot was to be next. Fortunately for the village, two determined people appeared on the scene, Gladys Crosbie and Betty O'Brien.

Gladys Crosbie was landlady of the Bricklayers Arms at the time, and also Clerk to the Parish Council, and she became a leading figure in a campaign to save the school. She raised a petition of 130 signatures, attracted Press coverage for the cause, and after several well attended public meetings, the Education Authority was persuaded that with families moving into the new houses in Church Close, the village school was viable. It was also agreed to re-build the school.

The other determining factor in retaining the village school was the appointment in 1962 of Betty O'Brien. She believed strongly in the church school ethos and the importance of a good start in education. The school quickly established a reputation for success at the Eleven Plus entrance exam to Grammar School, and pupil numbers grew. Her energy and determination did not go unnoticed at County level. She remembers being singled out at a meeting by the Director of Education who wanted to meet the head teacher who, he said, 'was so well known for getting what she wanted for her school'. The result was a significant rise in the number of parents sending their children to the school, and the employment of two additional teachers. By the time the new school opened in 1969, there were 75 children on the roll.

The new school was built on the same site as the original school on the Green, but further back from the road, with the advantage of a large hard playground in front and playing fields behind. The building was the first of a new era of open-plan schools with an attractive roof elevation, which allows natural light into all the internal areas and with a few minor alterations, the design has stood the test of time well, albeit another classroom is now required for the 90 or so pupils currently at school.

When asking people what they recall about their time at school, of course teachers and friends are named, and there have been many excellent staff and head teachers at the school over the years. Other people are mentioned too who were central to school life. One of these was Granny Luker, as the whole village knew her. For very many years she was the caretaker of the old school, a tremendously energetic lady who arrived at the crack of dawn to light the old stove and clean the school, before helping with the infants and then serving lunch and washing up. Granny Luker has been followed by an equally dedicated group of ladies, and when Sheila Hutchings, Wendy Richings and Rosie Dolby retired recently they had served the school for 63 years between them. And Gladys Crosbie, who has already been mentioned as the champion of the 'save the school campaign', has served 30 years as a school governor and longer as clerk to the Parish Council. Most of this group went to Longcot School, and their children and grandchildren have followed, and it is this continuity that brings the very special family atmosphere that is so valued in a village school.

To have an up to date view on school days, a group of Longcot School children, Richard Hagar, Matthew Harris, Amy Law, Tom Law, Steven Mace and Sarah Richards were asked what they thought Victorian children would most like about the school nowadays. The answer was 'they would enjoy playing on the adventure playground equipment, using computers, being warm at school and having inside toilets'. When asked what differences a Victorian child would find in school today, one boy said, '*when we have to sit on Miss Maynard's bench we don't come out with whip marks or anything. They used to come out with whip marks*'!

So it would appear that although many things at school have changed dramatically in 300 years, some remain the same. Boys are still boys and waiting to see the head teacher is still part of school life, even if the punishment is more humane!

## Extracts from the School Logs 1900-1969 and Managers' Minutes

*6 Feb 1912 H.M. Inspectors Report* The boy's playground is in a very muddy condition, and it is quite wrong that the boys should be allowed to play in it as their boots and clothes are covered with mud. The schoolroom floors are naturally filthy. The main room is heated by a large fire grate and a stove; the latter is not sufficient. During the recent cold weather the temperatures at the 'stove end' of the room at 8.50 was 30°F.

*5 Oct 1916*

On Thursday an aeroplane came down at recreation time and a number of the children went after it and did not come back until nearly 12, so the last lesson of the morning was not given.

*11 June 1917*

We have lent Little Coxwell School 1 dozen pencils, ½dozen rubbers and 1 box of nibs

*30 Sept 1918*

Owing to illness of horse the carrier was unable to take class to Faringdon for cookery

*February 1920*

*24th* - Temperature 40 °F. Vicar sent 2 scuttles of coal and logs. Mrs Packer and people in village sent a little wood. Head Teacher sent 3 scuttles and logs. Supply now quite out. None available.

*25th* School closed for the day as it is too cold to keep open.

**26th School closed. Coal delivered during afternoon**

*27th* School as usual. Attendance poor 10 children absent. Temperature 46 °F

*10 Jan 1923*

Alfred Archer an infant scholar met with an accident on the way to school being run over by a stone lorry with the result that his legs were crushed and he died on the journey to Oxford.

*24 Oct 1923* 1 ton coal received from J.Toomer & Sons £2.9.0

*22 Nov 1923* 1 ton coal received from J.Toomer & Sons

*20 Dec 1923* 1 ton coal received from J.Toomer & Sons

*14 May 1940*

School re-opened today instead of 20 May owing to the invasion by Germany of Holland and Belgium.

*27 Feb 1941*

Attendance this morning was very low, actually below 60% which was due partly to colds and also to enemy activity in the district last night which kept the children up until a late hour. (*Probably the night incendiary bombs were dropped. They just missed Watchfield Airfield and hit the outskirts of Highworth*)

*22 March 1953*

I was obliged to cane eight boys for climbing on school coalhouse roof. Large stones had also been thrown by them and tiles broken.

*11 Dec 1961 Managers' Meeting Minute Book*

In an open meeting held in July in Longcot School attended by parents and all interest in the closing of the school. Villagers argued strongly that a new school should be built in Longcot. A petition with 130 signatures had been received.