

The following is a transcription of a newspaper article, source unknown, probably published in April 1962

COMMOTION IN WHITE HORSE VALE

Longcot Opposition to Closing of its School

On the day that Selwynn Lloyd dropped his budget bomb I was visiting Longcot, one of the nest of little villages in the vast green expanse of the Vale of the White Horse, but hardly a word did I hear about the Chancellor. I found the local folk more concerned about the closure of their school and the building of a new one five miles away at Shellingford.

For nearly 60 years Longcot through its church and people has been responsible for its own educational arrangements. The controlled school there also caters for youngsters from Fernham and the little hamlet of Knighton and seemingly most of the inhabitants want to keep it that way.

Unhappily their school is outmoded with a hopelessly inadequate cloakroom, crude sanitation, no playing field, no school..... So it is now planned to provide a modern school building at Shellingford together with recreation ground to serve all three villages, Longcot, Fernham and Shellingford. A legacy and gift of 13 acres of land are available to help cover the cost of this substantial development and thus, incidentally to preserve a of local education control. A church school has been operating at Shellingford.

Many of Longcot's people are indignant about the proposal. This is not surprising perhaps for theirs is the biggest of the three villages with a population at the last census of 285 compared with Fernham 201 and Shellingford 181.

Last term there were 28 Longcot scholars compared with Shellingfords 17.

No Land

Then why not build the new school in Longcot they ask. The reason I understand is that the necessary land and facilities for this cannot be found in Longcot. Nevertheless I feel that everyone concerned will be much heartened by this lively interest in rural education.

During the course of the day everyone I met was ready to discuss the situation and to give his or her point of view. I also found myself much in sympathy with both sides and now feel more that when the final decision is made it will be influenced by unselfish long term consideration that will tend to bring these villages more actively together.

Among the people I saw was the Rev Leslie Wallace Harman, Rector of Shellingford who also ministers at Fernham and Longcot. A man of Kent, he has shouldered a great deal of work with the primary object of endeavouring to bring a fuller and more progressive life to the countryside.

On leaving Oxford he was for ten years (.....) a congregational minister engaged mostly in social work. He then went over to the Church of England. His first office being that of curate of St Giles, Reading whence he was appointed vicar of St Giles, Reading. For 15 years he also served as chaplain at H.M. Prison, Reading and in 1945 was appointed Diocesan Inspector of Schools.

A prolific writer, he is the author of several books and has given many talks on the radio.

Village Survey

Next month he will be opening a series of 24 evening lectures under WEA auspices at Faringdon Secondary Modern School, on the Vale of the White Horse. Another project that he has in hand

is a sociological survey of the three villages of Longcot, Fernham and Shellingford and in this he is being helped by four undergraduates from Cambridge. The object is to see what can be done to establish and build up a live social interest and generally to improve local services. I asked the Rector whether the maintenance of Longcot church and those of other villages presented very exceptional difficulties. He confirmed that there was certainly a lot to be done. And the way it is being done speaks much for the faith of the people.

Recently at Longcot the Rector appealed for volunteers to join in a weeks programme of cleaning and renovation. There was a remarkable response and very soon more than 40 men and women got down to the various jobs. That week half of the stone walling around the church was reconstructed, the gates repaired, additional electric lighting laid on and the interior spring cleaned.

My next visit was to the Primary Controlled School where in the past three years there have been many changes of headship. The last to go is Mr Glyn Davies, a Welshman from Tonyrvalfall who is now headmaster of Marcham village school.

It is a high roofed and well windowed school and one big room takes up practically the whole of the building. At the rear is a compartment reserved for the infants.

Bigger Place

At the Post Office and General Stores I met another Welshman, Mr Cliff Richards from and his wife who is the vice postmistress. On the previous Thursday a meeting of those opposed to the [Shellingford] scheme elected Mr Richards as chairman of a committee of eight set up to conduct the campaign.

Ground for their decision explained Mr Richards is that Longcot is not only the biggest village but also is a growing one whereas Shellingford is dying.

Since we came here three years ago he recalled seven houses have been built, two others are under construction and I understand planning permission has been granted for at least one other. The council also have two acres of ground on which they can build and as you see they are now having the sewerage scheme which will doubtless enable improvements to be made at the school.

I met Mrs E. Maggs, a farmer's wife who said she would be sorry to see the school closed but felt that ground for extension and for the purpose of a playing field there was no alternative.

Over the garden wall Mr F. Mansfield who keeps a general store 'I think the whole idea of moving the school is darned ridiculous'.

Lastly, I sought the view of Mr F. Horlick of Nutford Lodge, a Georgian fronted house and one of the few interesting buildings in the village. He has been dairy farming here for the last 24 years and informed me that there were about nine other farms within or just beyond the parish.

Good Fortune

When I asked him about the school he paused, reflecting for a while and then answered 'we should all like a resident parson and a resident headmaster in our midst but circumstances don't always make this possible. We should remember that the education authority decided 16 years ago to demolish all old and obsolete schools, the one in Longcot was condemned and has to be closed. What we should realise too, he added is that we have been invited by the people of Shellingford to share in their good fortune. I think we should give very careful consideration to such an offer before turning it down.

No, Longcot is not rich in social or public service not only has it no resident parson or headmaster but also no resident doctor and no resident nurse.

It has of course known much better days, with a peak population of 504 in 1841 and five years later it was linked with Fernham as an ecclesiastical parish, the living being in the gift of the Lord Chancellor. As long ago as 1717 there was a charity school here financed by the gentry and clergy in this parish neighbourhood and the inhabitants of the village and Fernham.

From the mid 19th century depression began to hit the village and as time went on nearly old cottages that had formed a 'little village' of their own behind the school disappeared as did the Village Feast.

In the Ark

Today apart from the Womens Institute the only formal organisation is that represented by the Youth Club which with its members meets during the winter months. Behind this little enterprise is Mrs New, a farmer's wife.

Whist drives and other such events are held in The Ark, a modest wooden structure originally given to the village as a youth centre.

Two additional social ventures are provided by the Bricklayers Arms and The King and Queen. One very strange thing about the so-called Longcot – Shellingford link as Mr Mansfield commented, is the absence of any bus service between the two places. True, there is a very circuitous route but only with and a walk in bear in mind.

Longcot folk are now looking forward to the September meeting of the Berkshire Education Committee when it is likely that a final decision on the fate of their school will be taken.

E.H.Y.

Next week E.H.Y. will close the Longcot story and take you onto neighbouring Fernham.

Four poor quality photos accompanied the article:

The Rev Harman chatting to children from the village school.

Mr E.H.Horlick, farmer of Nutford Lodge, Longcot

Mr Cliff Richards, postmaster and general stores proprietor

A view of the rear of Longcot parish Church and churchyard.