

A History of St Johns School, Lemsford. The first 100 years.

Compiled by Andy Chapman

The Education Act of 1870 required provision be made for all children to have the opportunity for an education. Prior to this date few children, other than those from wealthy families, were able to attend any type of school. At Cromer Hyde there was a 'Dame School' run by Miss Archer for about forty children whose parents paid 2d (about 40p in today's money) per week for each child. St Mary's School in nearby Welwyn had been established some years before but it was too far away for the children of Lemsford. In order that these children should have their own school Lord Cowper, who at the time owned the Panshanger and Brocket Estates, had a school built in 1872 and which he supported financially until 1903.

On the 4th May 1872, the first entry in the Head Teacher's Log Book was made by Mrs Mary Seaman, the first Head Teacher. On that day, seventy-seven children, ranging in age from three to thirteen, were enrolled. They were divided into two classes - one being taken by Mrs Seaman and the other by her husband Walter, her assistant. They were all taught in one room, the room now used as the dining room **in the oldest part of the school**. The school was approved by the Government on the 16th May 1872

Few of the children had any idea of numbers or of letters, and the first task was to teach them to read and write and do simple arithmetic. The girls were taught needlework, and the boys gardening, and all the children learned to sing. The Vicar the Revd. Fred Burnside, opened the school each morning with prayers, and made himself responsible for the teaching of scripture to the older pupils.

The children were admitted from the age of three upwards. Younger children were allowed to attend provided they were entered on a separate register. In 1875, one two and a half old disrupted the school so much by crying for his sister that, after one week, he was not allowed to attend again until his third birthday.

The pupils were drawn from a wide area surrounding the school; from Handside to Cromer Hyde and as far as Astwick and Coopers Green. The majority of families worked on the land. Wages were very low, and many parents found it difficult to pay the school fees of 2d a week, although the fees of some children were paid privately or by the parish. In 1876 the parish refused to pay for children under five. A national conscience about the employment of children was slow to develop and many children were kept at home to work on the farms.

Children aged 5 to 13 were required by law to attend school for a minimum of 250 sessions per year, unless they were unavoidably absent through sickness. The maximum fine for non compliance was 5 shillings (about £12.00 in today's money). In 1875 it was recorded that a fine of half a crown (about £6.00 in today's money) was imposed on the mother of a boy who had not attended for some weeks. A School Attendance Officer was first mentioned in 1879. On receipt of an Absence Report Form from the Head, he would visit the homes of absent pupils, first warning the parents and then instituting proceedings

if his warnings were ignored. When many men earned only half a crown to 5 shillings per week it is easy to see that the Attendance Officer was not overworked. Under the 1876 and 1880 Amendments to Forster's Act of 1870, children who had reached the Fourth Standard were permitted to leave at the age of ten, and those who had reached the Third Standard were not required to make more than 150 attendances in a year. Certificates of exemption were given to the successful children after the Chairman of the Managers (the Vicar) had satisfied himself that they had reached the required standards. Very backward or frail children could be granted special exemption. In 1891, schooling became free for all children from five to thirteen years of age.

Lack of suitable clothing, many children had no footwear, was responsible for large numbers being absent in bad weather and after heavy snowfalls very few children were present as the roads became impassable. The Hon H.P. Cowper made an annual gift of boots to the boys and cloaks to the girls, and until his death in 1887, provided treats in Brocket Park. He was sadly missed and was a great friend to the school. A year before his death he had provided the children with soup twice a week in cold weather.

Sickness of various kinds was prevalent during the early years of the school and epidemics were common. Influenza, measles, chickenpox, mumps and scarlet fever all spread rapidly and caused many absences. Bronchitis also took its toll and, developing into pneumonia caused the death in 1877 of Miss Emma Reynolds aged 15, a pupil teacher who had been at the school from the age of three. Smallpox hit Stanborough in 1877, but apparently no children died.

Each year there are reports of children being absent for various reasons other than sickness or bad weather. Many would go nutting and collecting acorns in Brocket Park in the autumn. Whole families were permitted to go wooding to gather winter fuel. The boys were often required as beaters when there was a shoot in Brocket Park. So many children were required to help on the farms to bring in the harvest that the school was closed in common with most others in the country. This gave rise to the long summer holidays now taken in August and early September.

It is known that many children were from poor families, and they must have often been very hungry. In 1875, two children were caned for eating another child's dinner. School dinners as now known were not provided until 1942, but it was recorded by Mr Ladbury in 1914 that he supplied soup for those who wanted it at a halfpenny for about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a pint. This was prepared from fresh beef, potatoes, carrots, parsnips, beans, peas and pearl barley. Lady Mount Stephen, then resident at Brocket Hall, presented the school with a canteen in 1905. She had noticed that the children had nowhere to play or to eat their dinners in wet weather.

From photographs it can be seen that, at the end of the 19th century, the boys were wearing 'Eton' collars, jackets and knickerbockers, the older girls wore dresses similar to those of their mothers with many pleats and decorated with ribbons, whilst the younger children wore smocks. Clothes were provided by Lady Mount Stephen. She also provided treats in Brocket Park in the summer time and gifts at Christmas.

The number of children attending the school steadily rose during the first years and in 1881 there were 100 pupils. The official plan was for the school to accommodate 120 pupils. This was physically possible but meant that three or four classes had to be held in each room. In 1883 Her Majesty's Inspector recommended that the school should be enlarged. A new classroom was completed in 1887 and, apart from some extensions in 1897, the buildings were to continue unchanged until the gallery in the infants room was removed in 1933. This had been recommended in 1918 by H.M.I. as had improvements to the toilet and washing facilities. But it was not until 1950 that work commenced on a new toilet block which was completed in 1952. Up to this time conditions had been very primitive.

Until 1951 the school was heated by open fires. The installation of gas central heating system was a most welcome change, as classroom temperatures were often very low. During the bad winter of 1947 indoor temperatures as low as 29° were recorded. The heating system installed in 1951 continued to give good service until it was replaced in 1971.

In July, 1970 two new classrooms and a new kitchen were added and various other improvements made. The latter included the removal of a chimney breast in the old building and the provisions of three plain glass windows. The heating system was renewed and hot water provided for the kitchen.

In the early days of the school, apart from the infants gallery, children sat at narrow tables and used slates for their work. Some textbooks were provided, such as Royal Readers and the Royal Geography Readers. Copybooks were used for handwriting lessons. During the years when Miss Aldridge was head teacher new slates were provided to which pink ribbons were attached. In Mr Ladbury's time, many new books and pieces of equipment such as easels and desks were received from the Educational Supply Association. New swings were erected in 1903, to replace old ones. In 1936 the school was presented with a radio receiver by Lord Brocket so that broadcast lessons could be received. In 1948 the school received its first film strip projector, a machine of very good quality. A television, climbing apparatus, tape recorder, film projector and a pottery kiln were bought with funds raised by the parents.

When the school opened in 1872, Queen Victoria had been on the throne for 35 years. Although wages were low so were prices of most essentials and poverty was rife in cities and towns. The countryman was in some ways better off than the townsman, and certainly better off than the industrial worker, whose wife and children worked in appalling conditions in mines, and factories, but it was still difficult for him to make ends meet. Many children were too poor to have proper clothing and many were ill-fed. Nearly all the children walked to school, some travelling more than three and a half miles from places such as Coopers Green. No doubt some would have had lifts on farm wagons or milk floats and some may have been bought on horseback. **But nowhere is any reference made to motor cars until the sad death of Brenda Lines, an infant who was killed by a car in 1922 outside her home at Stanborough. It is ironic that her father Frank Lines was**

famous at St Johns as the boy who received the silver medal of the humane society in 1889 for saving James Cochrane from drowning on the Brocket Estate.

The year 1887 saw the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria. On the 12th July she visited Hatfield for two hours. The Shah of Persia visited Hatfield in 1889. (I don't think this is relevant unless it mentions that the children were taken to see them) In 1893 George, Duke of York married Princess Mary of Teck. and Lady Mount-Stephen presented the children with medals and new shillings. The Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1897 was another occasion for celebration. The children were taken to Clarence Park, St Albans, where they were presented with Jubilee mugs by Sir J.P. Maple M.P. The next day they were again presented with mugs in Brocket Park, in addition the infants were given 6d each. The children were given a half day holiday on the occasion of the relief of Mafeking in May 1900 and a 'Peace Holiday' when the Boar War ended in 1902.

In the same year the Balfour Education Act was passed. Local authorities had to provide facilities for secondary education. Parents paid fees for this education unless the children were successful in a scholarship examination.

In 1909, the first mention is made of a school medical examination, carried out by Dr A. Gill.

In 1910, King Edward VII died. His funeral took place on 20th May. His successor, King George V paid a visit with Queen Mary to Brocket Hall on the 12th December. On this occasion, the children lined the entrance to the Park to see the King & Queen drive out in their car at a walking pace after the visit. Lady Mount Stephen presented a flag and flagstaff to the school in commemoration of the visit. On the occasion of the Coronation in June 1911, Lady Mount Stephen presented medals and the school was closed for a week's holiday.

The first Empire Day was recorded in 1911, and these continued in many schools until after the Second World War.

In 1912, the first dental inspections under a new scheme were carried out in the Nurses Home opposite the Church, the house now known as 'Gosmore'.

1914 was a memorable year. At Lemsford, the first school badges were worn by children of the top class. The decision to have a distinctive badge was made unanimously by the children after a debate. They designed their own badge, using the symbol of St John - a spread eagle in red on a black background.

The soldiers who were in France during 1914-18 were constantly remembered. The girls made many shirts for them and in November 1915 the older children unanimously decided to forgo all prizes that year and donate the money instead to Christmas parcels for 'our boys at the front'

In 1917 seven children from London were temporarily admitted having been sent to the country for a rest because of air raids. Four of them had not undressed for eight days before they arrived at Lemsford.

In 1918 the school had a half day holiday when peace was declared on November 11th. This was also the year that the Fisher Education Act was passed raising the school leaving age to fourteen.

In 1919, the Daily Mail organised and financed poultry and bee clubs for children. Lemsford chose to keep poultry, and in subsequent years paid visits to the beehive factory in Welwyn and to the poultry farm in Codicote. In 1921 the club attended a luncheon at the Cherry Tree Restaurant given by the United States Bee and Poultry club.

The girls began attending cookery lessons in Hatfield in 1920, the boys also going to there for woodwork. During this year the children were taken to Handside to see the digging of the first sod of the Daily Mail Ideal Village by Lord Hampden. In 1923 Handside School had been built by the Welwyn Garden City authorities who exerted pressure on the parents to send their children to it. As a consequence the numbers of children attending Lemsford School rapidly fell to 68.

The school was given a holiday in 1923 on the occasion of the marriage of H.R.H. the Duke of York, later King George VI, to Lady Bowes Lyon.

1924 was the year of the Empire Exhibition at Wembley. Forty of the older children were taken by bus to the exhibition through the kindness of Sir Charles Nall-Caine. later first Lord Brocket.

In 1929, the children had wonderful views of the ill fated airship R 101 on her trial flight from Cardington.

In 1932 the first school transport was provided, to bring in 24 children who lived at more than two miles distance from the school.

By 1933 the number of children on the roll had risen to 114, but had dropped to 88 in 1936.

School milk was first provided in 1934, at a charge of 1d for 1/3 of a pint to those who required it (or could afford it). During the same year, some of the children formed part of a Guard of Honour for the opening of the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital at Welwyn by the Duchess of York, and in November there was a holiday for the wedding of the Duke of Kent and Princess Marina.

1935 was again Jubilee year – this time for George V and Queen Mary. Great celebrations were held in Bocket Park, accompanied by the presentation of mugs, badges and medals.

Seven months later the King was dead, and the children listened on the radio to the broadcast of the funeral service. This radio had been presented by Lord Brocket and was used for the first time for a broadcast lesson on 'Science and Gardening' in September 1936.

In May 1937, the school was given an extra week's holiday in honour of the Coronation of King George VI, his brother Edward VIII having abdicated.

In 1939, the school numbers suddenly rose from 83 to 144 as a result of many children being evacuated from London at the beginning of the Second World War. During the war the school acted as a centre for various money-raising efforts. In 1942, £3,265 was raised for Warship Week; Wings for Victory Week in 1943 resulted in £3,375, of which the school raised £310; Salute the Soldier Week in 1944 raised £1,410, the school contributed £166.

During the war, mention was made of an incendiary bomb that fell in a nearby field, and of some bombs that fell in the Cromer Hyde area. Otherwise Lemsford appears to be spared.

V.E. Day was celebrated by a holiday on the 8th & 9th May 1945

In 1945, as part of the implementation of the 1944 Education Act the school became a Junior Infants School and older pupils were transferred to St Mary's School, Welwyn. The school leaving age was raised in 1947/8 to 15. The children were soon subjected to selection examinations, the 11 plus, the results of which determined whether children went to the Grammar School at Stanborough or the Secondary Modern School in Welwyn.

When the school first opened, the staff consisted of the head teacher and one assistant. Miss Digby's sister was employed as the first pupil teacher in 1874. Emma Binns served as a pupil teacher and then proceeded to Hockerill Training college in Bishops Stortford later the same year. Later intending teachers were drawn from the ranks of the pupils at the age of thirteen if they showed promise. They would receive special tuition from the head teacher before the school opened at 9am. The pupil teachers received an annual grant of one sovereign each (in 1890 £1 was worth nearly £60.00). In addition to these intending teachers, monitors were also employed to help look after the infants.

A qualified teacher, that is one holding a certificate from the Ministry of Education, would earn approximately £35 per year (about £2,100 in today's money) This varied because of the system of 'payment by results'. The children were assessed annually and the more that had attained the required standards the higher the teachers pay – regardless of any innate differences in children's learning capacity. It should be pointed out that poor results of some children could be discounted if they had been ill or if they were agreed to be 'incapable of learning'. With the advance of an understanding of psychology, it was realised that children varied considerably in their capacities and that they were not lazy if they were slow in their learning. Consequently, to pay teachers

according to pupil's attainments was seen to be unrealistic and the system was discontinued.

This short history of the first 100 year of St Johns School Lemsford was compiled by Andy Chapman of the Lemsford Local History Group from their archives with a special mention to the excellent article titled 'A brief History of Lemsford School' by Mr E.L Temple, head teacher from 1963 to 1979.

Please see list of Head Teachers below:

Mrs Mary Seaman 1872 - 1873
Miss Ellen Digby 1873 - 1882
Miss Alice Emma Sidwell 1882 - 1888
Miss Rose A. Giles 1888 - 1890
Miss Alice Aldridge 1890 - 1902
Mr William C. Ladbury 1902 - 1936
Mr. Frederick S. Sharp 1936 - 1946
Mr Harold E. Stanford 1946 - 1954
Mr Dennis Whittaker 1954 - 1960
Mr Dennis W. Jones 1960 - 1962
Mr Eric L. Temple 1963 - 1979
Mr Desmond L.B. Dunn 1979 - 1987
Mr Geoffrey Sturgess 1987 - 1992
Mrs Elizabeth Reeder 1993 - 1997
Mr Robin Archibald 1997 - 2001
Mrs Debra Massey 2001 - 2005
Mrs Christine Hall 2005 -