

A HISTORY OF LEMS福德: THE SCHOOL

by Meirion J. Trow from articles in the Parish Magazine c.1970

It is a curious fact of local history that one often knows more about the children of a parish than about the adults. This is due solely to the existence (by law) of the School log books. These form a record, however sketchily written, of admissions and departures, attendance, examinations taken and passed, holidays, events of interest within the school or locality, and even mundane information about the weather. Such documentary evidence rarely exists for a cross-section of adults, especially if they are the ordinary agricultural workers of a village.

St. John's Church of England Primary School was built in 1872 at the expense of the then Lord Cowper, who gave it his financial support until it became the responsibility of the county in 1903. Its founding is in itself a reflection of the growth of Lemsford Parish and of the need to provide some form of elementary education for children in accordance with Forster's Education Act of 1870. I have found vague references to education pre-1872, the most positive of these being W.C. Horn's assertion that a Mrs. Archer of Cromer Hyde ran what must have been the equivalent of a Dames School (without qualified staff) of about forty pupils whose parents paid twopence a week for the privilege. Regrettably Mr. Horn does not state his source of information and, as is usual in these early and mid-19th century establishments, written records appear to be non-existent.

The earliest entry in the log book is for the 4th March, 1872, when Mrs Mary Seaman was headmistress and Mr. Seaman assistant teacher. This sort of "husband and wife act" was common in 19th century England, although the roles were usually reversed. There were 77 pupils, divided into two classes, and the total range was three to thirteen years. It was not until 1876 that the Government approved St. John's, and until then each child continued to pay twopence a week in fees., The "catchment area" to employ a modern phrase, included Handside, Cromer Hyde, Symondshyde, Astwick and Coopers Green as well as the village itself.

It emerges from the records that a regular visitor to the school (sometimes three or four times a week) was the Vicar. Since St. John's was a Church of England School, a rigorous check was made on the religious content of the curriculum and the attainment - especially in Scripture - of the children.

"Lemsford School appears to be in a satisfactory condition in the matter of religious instruction, and the children are quite orderly" -
Diocesan Inspector, February 18th, 1878.

The pupil-teacher system was employed as early as 1873 - a senior member of the school (13 or 14 plus) taking over certain lessons while continuing under the guidance of the headmistress and striving to attain competence by means of a series of examinations usually held at a county level. The standard of professionalism among teachers and pupil teachers varied enormously, and indeed uniformity is still impossible, even under modern County control and national examination and assessment systems.

Visitors of a less regular nature were Government Inspectors, known even in the 1870s as H.M.I. Their task was to check the smooth running of the school, the appropriate standards of the syllabus, the aptitude of the children and the ability of the teachers. The first H.M.I. report for November 1873 will suffice as an example:

"The school has made fair progress. Mrs. Seaman will shortly receive her certificate.
Mrs. Seaman - certified teacher of the 2nd class.
Mr. Seaman - acting teacher.
Emma Binyon - pupil teacher, 4th year.
Mary Binyon - pupil teacher. 2nd year."

In general, as with most other bureaucratic documentation, these reports become more complex as the years pass.

It is hardly surprising, in what was still a rural community, at a time when education was new and often considered trivial by the working man, that the school year was geared largely to the farmers' year. For example the actual school year ended on September 30th in 1873 but the holidays - from the 8th August to the 8th September - are called Harvest Holidays, and attendances in September were often low "because the gleaning is not complete" and in October "many children were absent gathering acorns" (presumably for the feeding of pigs).

Neither was it only work on the farms that kept the children away, Cold weather, wet weather - all these leave a record of a sharp decline in attendance. Again it was the attitude to education half-hearted and indifferent that emerges in Lemsford as it does all over the country. Incidents of local importance are endless and constitute a holiday, official or otherwise, taken by the children. There was Welwyn Fair on the 24th September 1874; "Horse soldiers" drilling in Brocket Park in November of the same year; "several infants allowed to go Maying" each May 1st; "a dozen boys sent out to go beating on the Brocket Estate"; and the annual Christmas treat at Brocket Hall.

Absences due to sickness are extremely interesting, for they give an insight into the prevalent diseases of children and often of adults in 19th century England. Whooping cough, influenza and measles (88 children had this last in 1895) appear to be the most common, often necessitating the absence of whole families to avoid contagion. But there are rarer and more alarming instances; for example:

"February 5th 1877* Smallpox at Stanborough - several children stayed away* None of the children from Simonside have attended for four days".

Later in the year the pupil teachers were examined by a Medical Officer and the report made in the log book. And in November 18781 'It is rumoured that two families in Hanside have typhus fever". Death in the parish was not shunned, even by small children, just as death everywhere in Victorian England held a special place among the people - "Mary A. Tiley, a child of seven years was buried. First and second classes went to her funeral".

The report of 1882 read "The second Division did not seem to understand the Parables they had learned. The facts of Our Lord's Life should be kept in view".

The most severe punishment that is recorded at Lemsford School before 1884 is the detention of pupils, often for offences not committed at school. There is no mention of corporal punishment, presumably because the administrator of this would be a woman, the headmistress. In the few cases of parental complaint, it is invariably the Vicar who bore the brunt. In 1898 the Vicar and the local J.P. "asked children to tell parents that steps would be taken to lodge ... refractory children in a reformatory, and abusive parents would be brought into a court of justice and there dealt with".

By the 1880s a system of checks to ensure more regular attendance was devised by the Hatfield Union School Attendance Committee, The former resignation to the calls of other pursuits is disappearing, and in 1888 failure to send a child to school resulted in a fine of five shillings for the parents. In 1883 the school could accommodate 120 pupils and the average daily attendance was 94, a better record than that of 1881 when it was only 76.

An interesting entry appears in July 1884:

"Visit of a lady and gentleman, who made a short speech showing how much better off the children were than those in the "Manufacturing Towns!".

This sort of social awareness was only then beginning to dawn on the middle classes in Britain. One wonders what effect such a "speech" must have had on the children of Lemsford, who had probably never seen a city in their lives. In this year too, St. John's is first referred to as a "National" school and appears most obviously now as being divided into infant and junior sections.

The only mention of teachers' salaries that I can find is the sum of £35 per year offered for assistant teacher when the post fell vacant in 1898. Working conditions in the school are rarely touched upon, although it was over full by 1885 (with more than one class to a room), and in 1889 part of the Government report reads;

"The gallery should be improved if it were extended to the wall and fitted with a side-rail; a cupboard is needed, and the room appears to be insufficiently warmed."

Pupils sat in disciplined rows in this gallery, and used slates instead of exercise books, As is usual with 19th century schools, the high ceilings made the rooms cold and the small window panes made them gloomy. By 1900, the school had six members of staff including pupil teachers.