

## Schooling in the 1930's

By John Clements

Shrivenham School was opened by the Bishop of Oxford, Samuel (Soapy Sam) Wilberforce in 1863 on land provided by Lord Barrington. It was not until the Education Act of 1870 that the framework for education of children between the ages of 5 and 13 was introduced and not until the Act of 1880 that education with a few exceptions became universal throughout England and Wales. Elementary education became free for all in 1891.

The history of the school is well documented in a book by Frank Venables, so I decided to concentrate on schooling mainly in Shrivenham during the 1930's when the Queen would have been at the age for Elementary education. Luckily, I have been able to interview several people who attended school at this time.



The classic look of the school from the High Street since 1863. Photo by Neil B. Maw

The children who attended Shrivenham at this time came from the villages of Shrivenham, Watchfield and Bourton. There were a number of itinerant children whose father was a farm labourer working a short contract with a local farmer before moving on. I am told that these children did not mix and were difficult to get on with. The infants from Watchfield used to come by horse and cart but when they were juniors they would be

expected to make their own way to school either by bike or walking. When they arrived at the school, the boys and girls used a different entrance and had different playgrounds although the very young boys used the girls entrance and playground. Joyce Walters who went to the C of E school in Old Town remembers that the girl's school was next door to the boy's school but there was total segregation between the two schools until the schools came out at the end of the day. When at school the girls were addressed by their first name whilst the boys were called by their surname. Discipline was administered in a different way between the sexes - girls being very rarely caned.

The day would start with Assembly when there would be prayers often followed by a hymn. This would involve the whole school. Afterwards the pupils would go to their class area.

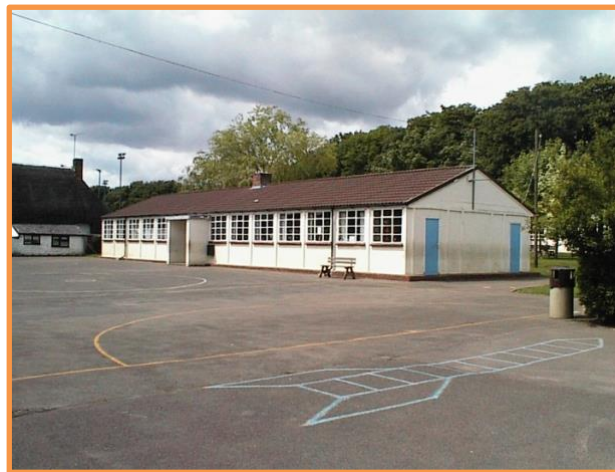


The old The pre-fab building that was the Kitchen, Dining Room and Assembly Room. Now gone. Photo by Neil B. Maw

When in the class the pupils would be taught the three "R"'s. In Shrivenham the spellings were written up on the Blackboard to be written down and learnt. Writing was done using pencil and paper. In Shrivenham the children initially sat at a desk with six pupils graduating to a double desk when older. In Old Town the girls were given a book with the words in it and they would need to learn the from this book. If they got them wrong, they would need to copy them out several times. Tom Bye went to school in South Kensington. He had trouble spelling shepherd with its two "h"'s. Every time he got it wrong, he was

hit over the knuckles with a ruler. The pupils were expected to write essays. The topics could include "about where I live", "Market on a Saturday". Reading was a class activity with pupils reading from a book in turn. The tables were repeated by rote being chanted by the whole class and still today people remember their seven times table. Milk in small bottles was provided in the mid-morning break.

The average class size was about 32. Occasionally the school was taken on an excursion and Alec remembers with glee a visit to Frys Chocolate factory near Bristol where he was able to eat as much as he liked. The Headmaster was a very keen gardener and naturalist. Each child shared a plot with another pupil where they grew such things as potatoes, carrots and brassicas. He arranged for a bee hive to be erected outside one of the school windows and owned a large birds' egg collection. Every week the children would be taken by horse and cart to Bourton. On a Monday (Shrivenham) and Tuesday (Watchfield) morning the boys would be taught woodwork by a teacher from Faringdon, a Mr Austin. On Thursday morning the girls would go to Bourton to be taught cookery.



The pre-fab classrooms. Now gone. Photo by Neil B. Maw

The hours were 09.00 to 12.00 with a two hour lunch break then 14.00 to 16.00. A lot of the children would go home for lunch. Alec Chambers who lived in The Barrington Arms said that both Teachers and Children would eat there. In fact one of the girls suggested that he join the school when he was four and a half and the Headmaster was happy to enrol him. After school the children would either play in the Rec but often would go to the bridge

over the Beckett brook called the stew where they would catch crayfish and sticklebacks which were put in jam jars.

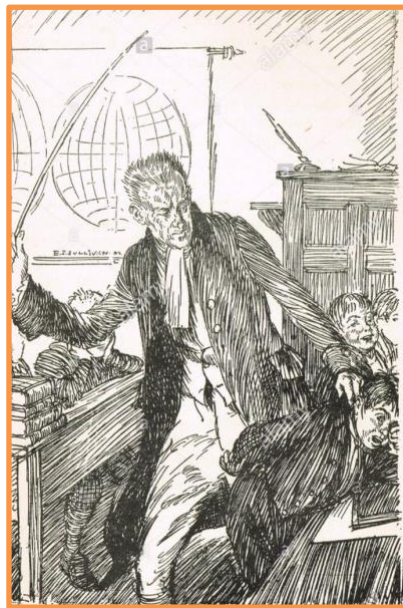
In London most of the teachers were male whilst in rural areas such as Shrivenham most were female. This had a lot to do with money as teachers in towns and cities tended to be paid more and had better resources. Teachers were tough and especially the men were described as sadistic and brooked no bad behaviour. The teachers were described as thinking they were God and behaving like that. One male teacher went round with a cane rolled up in a map. The pupils sat in silence and only spoke if invited to do so; breaches of this were treated either with caning or ritual humiliation.

By the thirties almost all the teachers had attended Teacher Training College. Between 1870 and 1900 the bulk of teachers especially in the countryside were pupil teachers. The numbers increased from 14,500 to 32,000. These were the brighter children mostly girls who at the age of 15 could enter a type of apprenticeship. They were allowed to teach for up to twenty hours a week and then had to be taught for one and a half hours a day by the head who had to be approved by the authorities. The head could have a pupil teacher for every 25 children in the school. These teachers could then go on to college and gain further qualifications but this meant that they could not start earning until they were 20, and a lot of their families could not afford to do this. They were particularly popular in the rural areas as they were cheap labour. After 1900 the pupil teachers were phased out and at the end of the Great War there were only about 1500. The last pupil teacher retired from Shrivenham in 1935 after 24 years as pupil and teacher.

Mr Frank Dixon (Dickie) Dance was the Headmaster of the school and the only male teacher during this period. He was known as a strict disciplinarian and had a history of poor relationships with some of the other staff. He is not remembered in a positive way by the old pupils who have described him as a bully. The female teachers are remembered with a degree of affection. Miss Newman who lived by the station was described as rotund and nice. Miss Wheeler, the pupil teacher lived in Watchfield with her family in The Eagle and helped escort the children who lived there back home. Alec recounts the enthusiasm felt by the older boys at the appointment of Miss Goater and Miss Gregory two young women. Miss Gregory left soon after as she married a local man and married

women were not allowed to continue working. Members of her family still live in the village.

Discipline was very harsh by today's standards and Dickie Dance was known to wield a vicious cane. Looking at the Punishment Book it is obvious that mostly caning was done for misbehaviour in school but also acts committed outside the school, "ill-treating girls on the way home", "catching hold of girls legs" and truancy. Gordon Miles was caned for writing in the dirt of the vicar's car whilst it was parked outside Watchfield Church on a Sunday despite the fact that he was away at the time. On the way to school from Watchfield, the children walked past Shrivvenham House. Behind the wall you could see a chimney for the heating of the greenhouse and one of the boys boasted that he could throw a stone down the chimney. Unfortunately, he missed and there was a sound of breaking glass. After the inevitable beating, he said "thank you, sir", which unleashed an even more violent assault. Dickie Dance had a peach tree in his garden of which he was inordinately proud. One year it produced a peach which was stolen. He was not amused and threatened to cane all the boys if the culprit did not own up because at least he would have punished the malefactor. The offender owned up. The Head was especially hard on his own son who tended to provoke his father with the inevitable results.



A regular occurrence pre-1970s - and it hurt. Drawing from Wikipedia

Punishment for girls tended to be a slap or being told to stand outside the head's room but public humiliation was the key stone for all pupils. Caning of girls was rarely done and only for gross misdemeanours