

WICK PAROCHIAL SCHOOL AND THE GROWTH OF EDUCATION



In England in the early 1800s there was widespread illiteracy. Many children then, and for years beforehand, were sent to dame schools where often they learned nothing, not even to read. However, this situation was accepted by the authorities who felt it very unlikely that the lower classes would become more industrious, more virtuous, or even happier by being able to do so. In fact, one MP at that time was quoted as saying "Giving education to the labouring classes would be prejudicial to their morals, and teach them to despise their lot"

One reason that teaching, such as it was in the dame schools two centuries ago, was so ineffective was that the dames themselves were often the wives of labourers and had scant learning themselves. Also, the cost of their lessons, even at two pence a week or less per child, was a significant barrier to a poor family. As one dame confessed "It is not much they pay me, and it is not much I teach them."

We cannot now know how much education, if any, might have been available in Wick in the time before an official school was established. The first formal Census shows however that the village population in 1841 was 303 people living in 63 households and of these households more than 40 were listed as agricultural labouring families. This suggests a substantial number of pre-teenage children in the village who must surely, with Queen Victoria on the throne, have had need for at least a little basic instruction. At that time this could only have been provided by a dame school.

Even in those parishes that had progressed from a dame school to some form of day school things were little better. The number of such schools increased steadily in the mid-1800s but only the younger children attended - nearly all had left by the age of eleven or twelve.

For Wick, records are scanty, but we do know that soon after 1860 the then Lord of the Manor, Alfred Ricketts Hudson, granted a site for a school on the little green in the centre of the village which years earlier had been the subject of an ownership dispute between the Dean and Chapter of Westminster and Richard Hudson 1. The outcome of that dispute was that the Court eventually ruled in favour of the Hudson family, a pound erected by the Dean and Chapter was pulled down, and the plot was thus left available for the eventual building of the school house.

The school, looking very much as we know it today, was financed by public subscription, and the National Education Office recorded :-

"Wick Parochial School number 227 was established by a deed dated 1 October 1864. Trustees were the Minister and Churchwardens of Wick, and two elected subscribers."

Barrows Journal reported:-

"The newly erected schoolroom at Wick near Pershore having been finished according to the design of W.S.Danks Esq. was opened on New Years Day. There was a fine service at the Parish Church, after which the children walked to the schoolroom followed by the whole congregation and their minister, the Rev. B. Hemming. A liberal supply of plum cake was distributed, after which all dispersed to their homes much pleased."



Even in their splendid new schoolroom the monotony of the three 'Rs' and learning by rote made children anxious to escape whenever their labour was needed on the farms. Parents too were partly to blame - without compunction they would keep a child away if there were crops to gather, and at Wick this continued for many years. Even after the turn of the century the meeting of the School Managers on 18 September 1903 recorded that they had received a request from village mothers for an extension of the holidays during the hop-picking. On that occasion they granted an extra three days, and the start of the school term was delayed until Thursday 24 September.

Later, with the Great War in progress, at their meeting on 20 March 1916 the Managers were still considering the employment of children of the age of 11 years on the land during the time of shortage of labour. They recorded however that so far only one boy had left the school for this purpose.

Not just here but throughout the country parents were in any event reluctant to continue with an education which, as far as they could see, would do nothing to improve a child's earning potential.



Yet despite all this, the children could not turn out so badly. The Wick School Managers formally recorded in 1914 that more time was to be given to the teaching of Sewing in the Girls Department, and also that some instruction should be given to them in Domestic Economy including simple Cottage Cookery. Girls from village schools generally were able to sew better than they do now and the boys found in later life that they could manage to do enough sums in their heads to keep track of their wages.



Starting from the middle. years of the 1800's elementary education gradually improved as more national, church, or endowed schools began to appear, and the number and capacity of these voluntary schools rose steadily. The 1870 Education Act began to bring in compulsory schooling, and from there onwards a policy of regular attendance and full-time paid teachers meant that illiteracy was being gradually reduced to the point where by the end of the 1800s the majority of farm workers could at least sign their names, if not read and write proficiently.



Teachers at Wick School are barely remembered today, but we do hear that in 1896 Miss Mary Frances Davies was appointed Head Teacher and remained in the post for nearly 40 years until her retirement in 1933. In her early years she was paid an annual salary of £70, and given the use of a furnished cottage. Also, in those first years of the 1900s she was supported by Miss Gertrude E Duffy as Assistant Teacher at a salary of £15 p.a. rising to £20 in 1903. Miss Davies' successor Mrs Doris Powell mysteriously only survived in the job a year, resigning in 1934 and was then replaced by Miss Doris Smith.

Other stalwarts of the school included a Caretaker who a hundred years ago was paid £12.10.0 per annum, and a man to clean out the school lavatories at 3d per time!

It is interesting to note that as the twentieth century progressed, people paid more attention to what today we refer to as Health and Safety issues. In 1910 Mr. William Nicholas, a local building contractor, installed an open fireplace in place of the old stove and stovepipe. This was done in accordance with the School Inspectors' recommendations, as presumably children were thought to have been at risk of scalding themselves. Years later in 1927 the same Mr. Nicholas was paid £47.11.6 for installing new iron railings round the school grounds in place of the old wooden ones. Oddly enough it was not until 1933 that another contractor, Mr. A. Pettifer was asked to fit a cover over the school well, to be fastened with an iron brace. We are compelled to wonder what had fallen down the well in the years before that was done. A little earlier, in 1927 Messrs Abel & Smith were asked to estimate for the installation of electric light.

After the First World War education was seen as more a necessity for modern life than it had been in the previous century. As a consequence village children were staying on at school in some cases right up to the age of 14, and this placed an impossible strain upon space and teaching facilities at Wick. By 1927 it was finally agreed that all pupils aged between 11 and 14 should be transferred to Pershore C of E School, and this was finally achieved in 1928 when Wick was re-listed as a Junior School. Despite this, pressure on space continued to increase, as evidenced in 1930 when the School Managers had to take a tenancy on the yard of the Malt House (now Ruyhalls Place) opposite for £5 per annum to provide a new, larger playground.



Everything continued smoothly until the Second World War and the further changes that brought about. Finally, in 1943, the Worcester Authorities announced they were shutting the school as from 1 September that year. The reasons given were the difficulty in finding accommodation for a new teacher and the small number of children (19) then remaining.

RAF Comberton, as it was so called, rented the school house from 1 November 1943 onwards to provide urgently needed accommodation for staff working at its 'secret' radar station down Wyre Lane. Some time later, after the War, Mr Wally Gowing converted the school house to a private dwelling which, for a number of years incorporated the Village Shop and Post Office.

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