

Ewelme School in Victorian Times

Ewelme News, Dec 2013-Jan 2014

The Parochial Notes entry for December 1913 featured the school – *“The lack of a proper playground question had been occupying the minds of the Managers for some time past. The trustees had now granted the use of the Almsmen’s yard adjoining the school to the Managers for one year to see if it could be satisfactory adapted for use as a playground. The purchase of a piece of land on the other side of the road had been suggested but this was vetoed as unsuitable by HM Inspector. It is hoped that the proposed place will prove satisfactory, as otherwise the situation will be serious. The village was shocked and saddened at the sudden death on October 31st of the schoolmaster’s wife Mrs Ellen Herman aged 48 from complications from an operation in an Oxford Hospital. She had held the position of schoolmistress for more than 20 years and was held in high esteem by old and young.”* Her husband, William Herman, was headmaster for 30 years, being appointed in 1895 when village children attended from age 5 to 12 years. In 1904 the leaving age was raised to 14, and a pupil who was just prevented from leaving at 12 spent her additional 2 years ‘teaching the babies!’ Mr Herman remarried, and continued as headmaster until 1925, educating two generations of village children. He died aged 90 in 1953.

Incredibly, only a century before Mr Herman’s appointment, no school operated in the mediaeval building. At the end of the 18th and start of the 19th century the school had not been used in living memory. It was *‘derelict and ruinous’*. The door was bricked up, the floors gone, and stones thrown by boys through the broken windows covered the ground of the lower room. Fortunately, in 1829 an energetic Rector, Dr Edward Burton came to Ewelme and pushed forward plans for restoration works to the school. As universal education was beginning about this time his intention was not to restore the endowed Grammar school, but to set up a National Anglican Day School to operate in the old Grammar School building. (The earliest reference Dr Kate Tiller can find for the new school being in operation in 1833, although other sources give dates of 1829 and 1830).



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In The Parochial Notes of 1899 there is an invaluable reference to this important step for educating village children contained in an obituary for Joseph Winfield who died on April 12th, 1899, aged 84 years. Having been born in 1814 he “...remembered the times of his youth when Dr Burton the Rector, [1829-1836] helped by Dr Kidd the Master, [1822-1851] established the village school in the old Grammar School room nearly 70 years ago. He would also tell of the long procession of school children who would walk up two and two to church on Sunday mornings, some of them at that time coming from neighbouring parishes, where there was no school.”

This provision for education and betterment was not seized wholeheartedly by all. As in all rural communities, where the farms needed large numbers of labourers and helpers, the children used to disappear at harvest time, so the school was closed for long periods of the year when they were not there. Also, farmers discouraged education advancement amongst the labouring poor because they felt that they would not want to work with them!

Although Joseph Winfield was born too early to benefit from the re-opened school he did take advantage of lessons available for illiterate villagers by learning to read. The obituary continued - “Later on he remembered Mr W. Franklin’s zeal in teaching the boys in Sunday and Night School. He had himself learnt to read after he went to work: but like many others, who have used their opportunities, he could take an intelligent interest in many subjects; and he was, withal, a God fearing and humble minded man”.

Dr Burton did not confine his energies to restoring education in the school building and church refurbishments. Joseph Winfield also remembered how “Dr Burton got the bridge made over the brook near the old mill, and got the road made along the common.”

Ewelme Village Archive