

EWELME SCHOOL
by Barbara Blakeley

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Go into Ewelme Church on a Tuesday morning in term time just after nine o'clock. There you will see the Children of Ewelme School as they silently climb the belfry steps into the Church. They are seventy or so in number. Their ages go from five to eleven years. In the summer the girls wear cornflower blue dresses. In the winter they have grey skirts with white blouses and royal blue jumpers and the boys wear grey shorts or trousers with white shirts and blue or grey jumpers. Two by two – the smallest holding hands – they file into their pews in St John's Chapel to await in silence the Rector of Ewelme who will take their Service. They will join in prayers for themselves and their families, for their teachers and their school and for the needs of other people. The Rector will tell them a story from the Old Testament as part of their National Curriculum. Afterwards they will return, quietly processing through the cloisters of the Almshouses, to their ancient School building and, for the youngest, to their two newly-built (1999) classrooms.

The original school was built in 1437 by the Duke of Suffolk and Alice Chaucer, Duchess of Suffolk, for boys from the Suffolks' estates. They were to be taught, mainly in Latin, by a Grammar Master in Holy Orders according to the Statutes of King Henry VI. In the first half of the 19th century the School became Ewelme Church of England National School. The last Grammar Master had gone and the first Headmaster had been appointed to provide elementary education to boys and girls from five to twelve years.

For at least the first half of the 20th century every school-day at Ewelme started with 'worship, hymn singing and religious instruction', usually in the classroom. In recalling Mr William Herman (Headteacher 1895-1925) a former pupil remembered – "the first lesson was always Scripture, learning the Collect." During the term a Diocesan Inspector would pay a surprise visit to test the pupils. There was no special preparation for this. Each year the Bishop's prize was awarded to the most diligent pupil. Another pupil at that time remembered "teaching the babies" for her last two years at School. The school-leaving age was raised from twelve to fourteen just as she herself turned twelve (1904). By then she "had learned everything" so had to teach. In her days there were fires in the grates, before the stoves were put in, and the oil lamps were suspended by iron rods. Upstairs the two classes, for children eight to eleven years and twelve to fourteen years, were divided by curtains. "There was a line of desks all down that top room, just room to walk through between the seats." The desks were "made of iron, six feet long – and the seats were very hard". There were five in a seat. "We went by numbers and my number was 86. Just the girls". Diocesan Returns of 1906 put the actual accommodation as 161 pupils and the average attendance as 112. Local Directories of the time may have used these figures and for 1920 put the average attendance at 135. Mr Herman's wife, Ellen, taught the infants downstairs "and other teachers came from Wallingford" to assist upstairs.

Another former pupil remembered "learning by rote, chanting tables" and learning "a lot of history and geography." He had started school aged three years when his first lessons were "drawing figures and animals in the sand" with his finger. There is a record of the history Mr Herman taught to the top class in 1915. "Romans, King Arthur, The Coming of Christianity, Alfred and the Danes, The Norman Invasion, Hereward the Wake, Joan of Arc,

Sir Walter Raleigh and Lord Nelson". For 1916/17 the pupils were to learn "Hunters and Traders, Britons at Home, Foes from Afar and Seawolves". The geography to be taught, also in 1915, he listed as "The British Isles and Europe, plus Holland, Norway, Switzerland, Japan and Australia." Weather was also on the time-table "with 'Vocabulary associated with Geography'". In his lesson plans for nature study Mr Herman included detailed and accurate drawings of flowers, bees, apples, nuts, animals and birds. For games and drill he also made detailed descriptions of exercises and practices the pupils would be doing. Mr Herman "widened the ideas of education; he went beyond the Three R's", one of his successors believed.

In 1908 Mr Herman received one of the first Log Books from His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) in which he could keep records of "reasons for absence" and other information on the daily life of the School. He also received a Medical Card for each pupil. The health of the children was carefully monitored. Attendance was of importance to School Managers. Certain standards, set by the Board of Education (1899), had to be achieved by each child. The first-year child, having achieved 'Standard One', could then go up to the next class, or 'Standard Two'. Payment of the teachers' salaries depended on these results. Mr Franklin who lived at 'The Views' and served as a Churchwarden, was a Manager and paid frequent visits to inspect the Registers. During 1909 and 1910 attendance was affected by influenza (thirteen pupils absent at one time), impetigo, chickenpox, ringworm, whooping cough. A sudden death was also bleakly recorded. Such a tragic event happened in the second half of the century when the emotions and reactions of parents and friends perhaps echoed those of their predecessors – shock and disbelief, fear, sorrow, travelling rapidly through the village. Medical examinations were regularly held in Mr Herman's time. The HMI looked for "healthful posture" and "development of attention skills". Other absences could be accounted for by seasonal work for the bigger children and the summer holidays might be extended (by one week in 1911) for bringing in the harvest. Another two days were given that year as holiday for the coronation of King George V in Coronation Week.

In Mr Herman's time most children leaving school at twelve years (later fourteen years) went straight into work – boys to the local farms, perhaps on the recommendation of Mr Herman. He was the person much in demand by the farmers to measure their ricks accurately and reliably using string and a stone. Girls usually went to work as domestic servants in the larger houses in the village. There were scholarships awarded by the Ewelme Trust to assist, among other candidates, boys and girls going to Grammar School from Ewelme. Parish records (1905/07) show that Mr Herman (who was also the Parish Clerk), plus School Managers and others, felt the examinations were too difficult for the Ewelme pupils. *"The period of History was too great for the age of the pupils, the Arithmetic covered too much ground, the grammar would severely test young teachers and the Geography questions might be modified"*. The conclusion was that the standards were too high for those who were meant to benefit from the original endowment. Those adults protesting felt also that the selection of candidates favoured better-off families at the expense of bright children in other families. A few pupils were successful in this period and the Trust continued to adjust to keep up with the rapid developments and changes in Education over the century.

A pupil taught by Mr Herman's successor did "not recall Ewelme School entrants to Grammar School being very good" under Mr Herman and also believed "he had a reputation for great ferocity". Others remember "a very good Schoolmaster", "a very strict Headmaster, a good musician" and "he was all right - we were very happy." The HMI

visiting to inspect Ewelme School in 1911, having examined the registers and the children's exercise books, reported, "The building is well adapted to modern school requirements. The School ranks amongst the foremost in the county". The Managers were congratulated. In addition they had raised £135 from a pageant and "this would provide water in the classroom, "but", it was declared, "a playground was needed". No thought was given then to providing improved sanitation for the children. Located approximately where the present day cloakrooms are situated, were earth closets and "probably a drain". The garde-robe at that end of the building had been pulled down much earlier and a drain may have survived from then. A few children had grandparents living in the Almshouses and felt themselves fortunate that they did not have to use the not-very-private closets provided by School. New schools being built in this period in the county and elsewhere generally included 'outside toilets', and mains drainage had still not reached all rural areas.

No log-book entries or lesson notes are recorded after 1911 when there were seventy-one children on the roll, but Mr Herman continued as Headteacher until 1925. During that time he would have seen several fathers, and perhaps recent pupils, go off to war. One father joined the Royal Horse Artillery and served in France. Being of short stature he was able "to avoid the snipers" and so returned home safely in 1918. Others never returned and their names are on the War Memorial in Ewelme Church. Unemployment was common in the area. "Men walked from Wallingford" to pick up work in harvest time. The beginnings of mechanisation were noticed "which changed the village forever". The roads were metalled including the road up the hill to Ewelme Down House "for the cars from London". For some of the people in the village without regular work and with a large family those years were harsh. The older children in one family went to a children's home and stayed till they were old enough to work. They never went back on the roll at Ewelme School.

Mr Robert Quixley, the next Headmaster, arrived in 1925. He was in his early forties. His wife was a Cornish woman and they had two daughters. Their son, also Robert, was born at School House in 1928 and educated by his father at the School. His sister, Isobel, was probably the first girl from Ewelme to finish her education (via Wallingford Grammar School) at Oxford University, and Robert may have been the first modern Ewelme schoolboy because he too graduated from the University. Mr Quixley Jnr, now retired, remembers his early school-days with his father and recalls not realising till much later "what a fine grounding" he and his fellow pupils had at Ewelme School. This is generally confirmed in other interviews. He puts this down partly to the organisation of the teaching when Mr Quixley and Miss Walker, who came in 1932, taught the two older age groups of the children at either end of the upstairs classroom. The more able and alert young pupils could take advantage of the seniors' lessons and those sitting for the scholarship examinations would take part in classes normally for thirteen and fourteen year olds. Consequently, on entering his grammar school (in Cornwall) at eleven years of age he was able to do simultaneous equations "to the amazement of his new headteacher".

Mr Quixley the Headteacher is remembered by some in the village because "he believed in education for everyone, not just the children of the rich". In his day "a great many pupils won scholarships to the Grammar School". Ewelme "led the County in terms of numbers in proportion to the students in the School". Presumably, a number of these successful pupils have left the village over the years. The successful who remained and raised families sent their children, followed by their grandchildren, to Ewelme School.

Discipline was one of Mr Quixley's strengths. He was an experienced teacher having had one previous headship and a successful career in the Army Education Corps when he had served in India and Arabia and in Ireland during the First World War. This military background no doubt served him well when war-time conditions (1939-45) prevailed in Ewelme School. The only extant written record of the School for that period appears to be a note dated 1938 referring to a Resolution of the Managers that "The windows be measured and an application be made to the Local Education Authority for blacking them out to enable the fire-lighting and cleaning to be done", and a Manager's note dated November 1939 under the heading "Air Raid Precaution" (ARP) that "Children be reminded to bring their gas-masks to school with them as all children without gas-masks could be sent home in the event of an air-raid taking place". War meant disruption to family life and children of Royal Air Force families at RAF Benson began to be enrolled at School. Often these families were temporarily without fathers. Other children were evacuated to Ewelme, some in families; some were sent without parents to live with Ewelme families. The evacuees arrived, the children went to School and then some returned to their homes only to "flood back in lorry loads" when bombing raids resumed with even greater intensity. Everyone was affected by this continuous influx and coped with it in their own way; there are very few references to difficulties or hardship, but for School the lack of space and resources may well have been inhibiting to a lesser teacher than Mr Quixley.

The School still had earth-closets, the play-ground was poor, there was no staff-room, no cloakroom and no kitchen as we know these things today. A family of evacuees occupied the annexe, there was another family residing in the Muniment Room and a Service family had been allocated the apartments of the Master of the Almshouses (Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford), evacuated families and displaced persons came and went at School House. Yet the numbers on the School roll were also increased by "the good reputation of the School". Families from outside the village chose to send their children – not always with the approval of the LEA. Mr Quixley, remembered for his "regimental approach", took all these children under his command. "He was strict, but always fair". "If you did wrong you got the cane". "He put in a lot of time to help the slower ones come forward". "He was stern and kind", and "He encouraged boys to learn a trade, save money and go and see how other people live".

As the number of children continued to rise – "120 maximum in Mr Quixley's time" – another teaching post was created. Mrs Minnie Harris held this post for a time and she is also remembered for being the first woman to be allocated an Almshouse in her own right. Later, "Miss Coombes had the infants downstairs – she was young and pretty". One year for the Reading Room Concert she sat on a log with the other performers around her to sing *'I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas'* holding in her hand a Christmas card. A happy childhood memory from the bleak war years.

Another former pupil describes the organisation and style of teaching in the School during the 1930's and 40's with Mr Quixley and Miss Walker. An older boy would stand at the top of the stone staircase pulling the bell-rope from 8.50 to 9.00 am. Timing and organisation depended on the Church clock seen through the classroom windows. After the calling of the registers there were Morning Prayers, a Bible reading and a hymn. "Good singing" was encouraged by Mr Quixley's bass voice and Miss Walker's piano playing. Written maths and mental arithmetic, with geometry and algebra for the top class, led up to fifteen minutes' playtime. English or geography or history were studied in the second half of the morning, plus general science once a week. For the boys, in the afternoons, there was drawing,

painting, woodwork and bookbinding. For the girls, needlework, crochet, embroidery or smocking. One afternoon each week would be devoted to gardening for the boys. This was sometimes widely expanded in the summer. "Horticulture and agriculture were the mainstay of village life". The extension of teaching and learning to the outdoors was welcomed by some of the boys but others recalled "mixed feelings" and we have a description of Mr Quixley "marching the boys three abreast with garden forks over their shoulders to their allotments – left right, left right!". They cultivated land in front of Cloister Cottage, in the Master's garden and the School playing field. Digging for Victory was part of their war effort. This also included closing the School for two weeks for potato picking. However, one gentleman still wonders what happened to all the carrots and beetroot he "learned to grow and how to store in the shed".

Mr Quixley's style of teaching included learning by rote and most former pupils remember "learning their tables". Also remembered are the mnemonics for "all the Cotton Towns, all the Wool Towns, all the Rivers and the Battles of the Civil War". There was "No Plan Like Yours To Study History Wisely", to remember Normans, Plantagenets, [Lancastrians, Yorkists], Tudors, Stuarts, Hanoverians, and Windsors. Resources for teaching and learning were comparatively sparse. There were text-books with black and white illustrations but few visual aids. "Pictorial Education", a teachers' publication, was a favourite with its large pull-out illustrations in bright colours for pinning on the wall. These would be carefully preserved in the classroom cupboard till the subject came round again. Miss Walker's gift for teaching handwork still bore fruit up to the end of the century. The winner of most trophies for needlework at the annual Show was the same person every year, a pupil of Miss Walker. She taught for nearly thirty years at Ewelme School, retiring in 1962. In December of that year "Miss Walker's Tea Party" was held and attended by many of her former pupils. "It was an occasion noted for the many colourful and excellent decorations and exhibits" intended as a tribute to her. Some of the children now grown up and retired who swelled the numbers of Ewelme School during the war pay occasional return visits to their former hosts and friends. One, who "adored school", acquired from Mr Quixley "an everlasting love of India" and can still "draw a map of West Ghats and East Ghats with the Himalayas across the top." She graduated as a teacher of geography and maths and, after retirement, qualified as a designer of embroidery: reflection perhaps of early years at Ewelme School. An abiding memory for her was the end of each school day. "At 3.40 pm every day teachers and children sang together – *'The Day Thou Gavest Lord is Ending'* and I used to look out of the classroom window and see the Church clock".

In the second half of the 20th century there have been seven Headteachers at Ewelme School with Miss Walker, the Assistant Teacher since 1932, providing the continuity throughout the 1950's and 60's. Mr David Jones was appointed Headteacher in 1949 and Mrs Jones was appointed to teach the Infants. Both had formerly been Grammar School teachers and were remembered in the village for "their very high standards" by parents of that time. They were keen to make every possible provision for the children over and above what was already in place. This was a time of major changes in education in England following the 1944 Education Act when local education authorities were required to make plans to provide separate primary and secondary schools. In 1947 the school leaving age had been raised to 15 years. Secondary schools were provided first at Dorchester and then Watlington for pupils from Ewelme and neighbouring village schools. As the buildings were completed and children aged eleven years and over were transferred the teaching and learning in primary schools would change. In 1953 when Mr Jones was succeeded by Mr Roger Coles there were seventy-five children on roll, now divided into 19 Infants, 32 Lower Juniors and 24

Juniors. To start, Mr Coles called staff meetings and described how classes would be “grouped for basic subjects”. £10 was to be spent on games and play materials. Throughout that first term School had a procession of visitors. The Rector was one who called regularly as well as holding a weekly service for the children. A Clinical Psychologist came, then a Physical Education Advisor, the Health Visitor, a Welfare Officer, a Police Officer to look at bicycles and road safety with the children, the County Music Specialist and the School Dentist all visited in turn. Thirty-eight children were found to be in need of dental treatment. The term ended “with a fine Christmas dinner served to the children” followed by a party and, on the last day, a Service in Church.

The Rector was ex-officio Chairman of the School Managers and they with Mr Cole had the task of converting the School to ‘aided’ status, also in compliance with the 1944 Act. Many small schools such as Ewelme had been established under Trusts to “provide education for the poor of the parish” with teaching according to the Church of England. This was before Parliament allowed in 1870 the establishment of Board Schools and later County Schools to provide free education. Then the School Managers were responsible for all costs relating to the school building. From 1833 the State had provided an increasing amount of financial assistance, mainly for the payment of teachers. The national need for the expansion of education was beyond the means of many governing bodies, or managers, and the 1944 Act enabled schools to become either ‘controlled’ or ‘aided’. Aided initially meant that the LEA would meet most of the running costs, including teachers’ pay, but the Managers had responsibility for improvements to the school buildings and maintenance of the exterior fabric, and could claim 85% of this cost from the Department of Education. Schools like Ewelme with an ancient endowment also had to comply with their Trust Deeds. In addition, aided schools could appoint their headteacher and managers, thus assuring the continuity of the Church of England teaching.

Before the new ‘aided’ status could be achieved it was necessary to make some improvements to the School building and money had to be found for this. The Rector explained the advantages of becoming ‘aided’ to a meeting of parents. Afterwards, a village meeting was also called. A village committee of support for the project was formed with the purpose of raising money.

The need for improvements was made more urgent by the continuing rise in the number of children on roll. In 1957 there were eighty-six children and over half of these were the sons and daughters of Royal Air Force families. Plans for the expansion of RAF Benson had been known about for some time. There had been a proposal that the LEA would build extra classrooms at Ewelme, but the Rector had warned that Ewelme School would then cease to be a Church of England school. The Muniment Room had been considered but had not enough light for a classroom. The annexe was in use and had been improved from time to time. Perhaps memories remained of the greater number of children during and after the war and the prospects of the improvements now in hand persuaded those responsible that the two classrooms were sufficient. The desire of “the village” to help and to protect its ancient School continues today in many ways. Then, a Summer Fete in the grounds of The Manor raised £210, a similar amount came from a Fete at New Place (now Loretto) and a concert in Church by Miss Jelly d’Aranyi added another £220. The target was never quite reached but plans were modified allowing Messrs Boshers to start preliminary work in July 1957 by erecting a temporary toilet block in the playground. By 1959 School was integral with School House, there was a Medical Room (now a small staff room), a kitchen with hot and cold water, rows of hooks and lockers in the new cloakrooms for the children’s coats and

gym shoes, and flush toilets. Ewelme Church of England (Aided) Primary School now had its present day title.

Mr Cole is remembered for being “very keen on all sports for children”. The School playing field, first used by School through the generosity of Sir Donald Somervell, Attorney General, when he lived at the Old Rectory, had not, in Mr Cole’s time, been reclaimed from its war-time use (growing food). Football, cricket and rounders were played on games afternoons on the land behind the New Rectory. Mr Cole was very pleased when other sporting enthusiasts in the village, together with the Parish Council, made the recreation area on the Common. The Headteacher’s thanks are recorded in the Parish Council Minutes. The School held their first Sports Day on the Common in 1961.

Her Majesty’s Inspectors had visited the School in June 1960. There were just over a hundred children in three classes. Infants and Lower Juniors used the two classrooms. The Lower classroom was also used to serve sixty-five children with their mid-day meal. The Juniors worked in the annexe. Teaching with Mr Cole were two full-time teachers, two part-time teachers and a peripatetic teacher to help with reading. The Inspectors’ final remarks, after delivering a verdict of “excellent”, were “a pleasant and interesting little school”. The following June Mr Cole was being interviewed for a headteacher’s appointment in Kent. In his final diary entry he “gave thanks to God for many and varied experiences and also for the great happiness I have enjoyed while serving Ewelme School”.

A school was built at Royal Air Force Benson in 1961 by the Local Education Authority. When Mr E M Nicholas took over as Headteacher at Ewelme School in January 1962 there was “deep snow everywhere” and sixty-six children on roll. When the old juniors became the largest group Mr Nicholas transferred them to the upstairs classroom. The Lower Juniors, with Miss Walker, fitted comfortably into the annexe and the Infants remained in the downstairs classroom where they were taught by Mrs Nicholas. At his first staff meeting Mr Nicholas emphasised that it was “most important that discipline should be more firm – but without being at all restrictive to enthusiasm and initiative – it was vital to encourage an attitude of pride in doing worthwhile things well”. At a meeting for parents he announced that formal homework would be discontinued and “life at School would be much busier”.

Mr and Mrs Nicholas were both keen to continue the weekly Service of Common Prayer, to involve the children in community projects, to widen their horizon with outside visits and by introducing them to visitors from overseas, many of whom were Mr Nicholas’ own contacts from Commonwealth countries. He noted that “all visitors commented on the superb attitude of the children, especially the infants”. Similar compliments were paid during educational visits by a Deputy Education Officer and an Adviser who “were encouraged by the progress of the School” and the “life and the vigour therein”. An HMI visited and also commented on “the great progress of the School – and more power to your elbow”. A busy morning included the arrival of an internal assessor to observe the student teacher which coincided with a visit from an Assistant Education Officer who complimented members of staff. He remarked “It is good to see a school running so happily” while at the same time the Headteacher was dealing with an escaped pig in the cloakrooms!

It was Mr and Mrs Nicholas who kindly organised Miss Walker’s farewell tea party. At a later date they also attended Mrs Scaldwell’s funeral. She had been the School caretaker for over thirty years. “Rarely can a school have had such a devoted caretaker”, Mr Nicholas recorded. These departures of long-standing friends of the School coincided with other

changes. The roll was fluctuating between the sixties and low seventies, going down to fifty-six children in September 1965. The probability of becoming a two-class school had been known about for some time, impeding progress as far as planning and organisation were concerned in Mr Nicholas' view. In the winter of 1963, however, lower numbers may have been advantageous. "The severe winter conditions of January and February continued without let-up till half term. Deep snow and cold intense. Roads dangerous. Entire time spent in classroom – no playtime or dinner time...", Mr Nicholas wrote. There was influenza among the children but the effect on attendance was not so severe as it had been in March 1959 when streptococcal throats accompanied the 'flu and thirty-one children out of ninety-two were absent. A summer epidemic of measles in 1963 had affected the children when only half the School could attend Sports Day. There was also "much illness" in the winter of 1964.

A variety of visitors continued to show an interest in the School. A BBC producer and an HMI came to observe the use in the classroom of the schools' programme '*Travel Talks*'. Others were from Kenya and Fiji, from Monserat and Northern Nigeria, from British Guinea and a party of more than fifty teachers, organised by Oxford Rural Community Council, came from Germany. In addition, Father Christmas is believed to have paid his first visit to Ewelme School during Mr Nicholas' time.

In the summer of 1966 Mr and Mrs Nicholas and their family prepared to leave Ewelme. They were to take up teaching posts in Cornwall and later Mr Nicholas was ordained into the Church of England. By the time of their departure the number of children on roll had increased to sixty-nine, and a third teacher had been appointed. Of the school-leavers that year Mr Nicholas recorded that "three children had been selected for secondary school and three for grammar school", (the latter having passed their eleven-plus examination). Mr and Mrs Sykes, successors to Mr and Mrs Nicholas, spent a day at School in May when Mr Nicholas wrote, "It is good to be followed by such a happy choice". His diary concludes with the words "It has been a joy to belong to this ancient place".

Former pupils and parents remember, with the arrival of Mr and Mrs Sykes, the first Christmas Bazaar at School when £77 was raised for School funds, the first football match for many years when Ewelme beat Dorchester 2-1 and the first swimming lessons for the children of Ewelme School. These took place at Turners Court on the Henley Road, a County Council residential establishment for boys. Remembered too was the South Oxfordshire Sports Day when Ewelme came third.

High on Mr Sykes's list in his first year was the introduction of comprehensive education at secondary level. The School was closed for one day to allow Ewelme teachers to attend a seminar at Icknield School in Watlington. In May 1967 the Headteacher of Watlington visited Ewelme to give a talk on comprehensive education to parents. Parents who hitherto had been used to children going either to a grammar school or a non-grammar school after primary education wished to know whether the classes would be 'streamed' or 'mixed ability'. Now all Ewelme children would go to Watlington and the County Council would provide free transport. There would be no more scholarships to Wallingford or Didcot and no secondary school at Dorchester.

Mr Sykes is remembered by former pupils for his art and the handwriting lessons. The attractive script he taught the children stayed with many of them into adulthood. His heraldic illustration of the Chaucer and Suffolk families, founders of the School, is displayed

in Church and is much copied by young and old. Families recall Sports Days with Mr Sykes remembering “the flags, the loudspeaker, the Press”, and the Nativity plays at the end of term with “angels with great white wings in the dimmed light of the upstairs classroom”.

The number of children on roll was over seventy when Mr Sykes reported to the Managers that he expected the numbers to increase and that he thought provision should be made for two classrooms and for increased floor space for extra toilets. The Managers noted “that education was changing in many ways”, that “Ewelme could become a five years to nine years school,” that the Royal Air Force School at Benson “built for over six hundred was just over half-filled”. The Managers suggested that the Headteacher “might sound out the LEA on a temporary extension known as a Terrapin building”. It seems there were too many uncertainties, but perhaps nobody was yet ready to remove the cloak of nostalgia that lay over the beautiful and ancient building and prevented anyone from recognising what the children needed, what the building needed, what the village needed. That had to wait for another quarter of a century.

The Managers, at one of their meetings, enjoyed a conducted tour of the upstairs classroom and noted “the piano, the tape recorder, the television set and other excellent aids to teaching”. They appreciated the Headteacher’s description of how the School was run. “Mr Sykes took the senior class upstairs with the help of Mrs Eustace (infant class helper) who kept order if he was called away. Miss Chamberlain did two afternoons’ secretarial work. Mrs Sykes and Mrs Smith (The Courtyard, Ewelme) each taught for half a day in the annexe. Mrs Richardson took the Infants with the assistance of Miss Cox, pupil teacher. Mrs Foster did dinner duty then playground duty at the dinner break. The kitchen staff were Mrs Greenway and Mrs Jones. Mrs Prior and Mrs Sawers cleaned the main building and Mr R Gilbey the annexe.”

The Headteacher and other teaching staff did not normally attend Managers’ meetings. The Managers were appointed by the Diocese, the Parochial Church Council and the Trustees of the Ewelme Almshouse Trust, owners of the building and the land it stands on. Representatives from the Parish Council and the County Council also attended meetings from time to time. Repair work to a part of the building that might need to be done urgently – such as attention to a leaking pipe, a blocked drain, a suspect chimney or failed heating system – could be set in motion by the Headteacher. Major requests for improvements to, say, the classroom lighting or replacement of the fire escape usually took much longer because reference had to be made to the Trustees, their agents, perhaps English Heritage and probably the District Council Conservation Officer. Cuts in funding by the LEA often caused problems. These could lead to reductions in teachers’ hours or even the number of teachers.

Managers had to find and appoint Headteachers and they went far afield to find a successor to Mr Sykes but first “wished to put on record their thanks to Mr Sykes for his four years at Ewelme who with his wife has run the School very smoothly and happily...” At the end of 1970 the Managers appointed Mr George Cannon.

Former pupils and parents living in Ewelme today remember “happy schooldays” with Mr Cannon. Brides and grooms invite Mr and Mrs Cannon to their weddings; other past pupils return and visit them or keep in contact. The Cannons came from a large Royal Air Force school (1000 pupils) in Changi, Singapore. They settled into School House and Mr Cannon’s work for Ewelme School began on 5th January 1971 with seventy-seven children

on roll. Former pupils and parents recall with pleasure the residential visits with the Cannons to Yenworthy Lodge in Somerset, Woodlands in Herefordshire and the camping at Mongewell with seventy-six children. They remember too the visits to exhibitions, museums, cathedrals and castles. The School uniform, much as it is today but without the logo, was popular when introduced. All items were available in local shops or on the market stalls. For the dressmakers among the parents Mrs Cannon kept a roll of cornflower blue checked cotton material.

In the classroom Mr Cannon held partly to “old fashioned teaching, the three R’s and the blackboard” with formal timetabled lessons for grammar and spelling and emphasis on the enjoyment of reading. Much of Mr Cannon’s teaching of maths from the beginning was concerned with the new decimal currency (in operation 1971) and metric measurement. Fortunately, the new maths books he needed to order immediately had adopted decimalization and the children were often in advance of the adults in their familiarity with the new system. The timetable could “be flexible for topic work”. ‘Topics’ were one of the innovations, along with ‘child centred’ learning, emerging from the teacher training colleges at the time. But Mr Cannon had firm ideas about history. Children should learn British History – not “this history of the motorcar idea”. In 1976-7 the top classes were learning about the history of the Celts, the Saxons, the Vikings, the Normans and Victorian Ewelme, plus a small diversion into historic drama about Joan of Arc and a brief look in 1977 at the Russian Revolution. At this time the LEA funded a resource centre for County teachers in Henley which provided audio/visual aids – all very popular with the children. This facility disappeared with the “education cuts” that Mr Cannon had to contend with, though it was a small loss compared with that of losing a full-time teacher at one stage and frequently coping with threats of “closures of small village schools”.

Mr Cannon retired in 1986 but did not disappear entirely from the School. That year, now living at Cloister Cottage, he reappeared as the Grammar Master wearing a long brown habit with a hood and girdle, for the School’s week-long celebrations on the 550th anniversary of the founding of Ewelme School. “Alice Chaucer Duchess of Suffolk” also made an appearance dressed in splendid mediaeval court costume. The children wore costumes of rustic tunics and dresses. With bare legs and sandals they went about the School and playing field practising mediaeval crafts and pastimes. The village thatcher was there to teach them his skills, and the potter likewise. They learned baking and brewing, stone carving, weaving and hurdle making. The photographer, School’s parent governor, recorded the events and his village studio created a beautiful film accompanied by music. The film was shown at the first Governors’ Annual Meeting for Parents.

Managers had become Governors. Governors had increased in number. They were required by law to produce an Annual Report for Parents at an annual meeting. A Parent Governor had to be elected by parents. The Governors took on the financial management of School, hitherto overseen by the LEA. The School had to teach the National Curriculum. The children had to be tested and their progress and needs assessed and recorded. School would be inspected. Policies and development plans were required. These changes were enshrined in the 1986/88 Education Acts. The arrival of the files of the National Curriculum subjects meant that new shelves had to be built to accommodate these oversize items. English, maths and science were named as the core subjects with seven foundation subjects, namely history, geography, art, music, physical education/games, information technology, design and technology.

There were over seventy children on roll when Mr David Price took over the headship. Mrs Kelly, who had taught with Mr Cannon for several years, continued with the infants. Mrs Kelly and the Headteacher supported several projects in the village community including the link with Nolay in Burgundy. Mrs Kelly, a French speaker, was the first person from Ewelme to visit the little French town. With the Twinning Committee the School helped to arrange the first expedition by coach and ferry to France, taking several of the older children from School, plus parents, governors and other adults. School provided hospitality when French groups visited and organised children's games in the village hall and on the Common. From an idea of Mrs Kelly, who wished the children to have a distinctive experience of the fiftieth anniversary of the ending of the Second World War in 1945, a 'Street Party' was organised. For one day small children on tricycles and bigger children on bicycles, girls with dolls' prams and boys with footballs enjoyed the freedom of the village street. For once in their lives there was no traffic. The roads were closed and tables were set down the middle of the road from Days Cottage to Kings Pool. "All the village", some wearing clothes of the forties was seated for a communal tea. Shortly before the Headteacher gave up teaching and left the village the Friends of Ewelme School – FOES –, which had been running successfully for ten years and consisted mostly of parents, completed their fundraising for the timber climbing apparatus on the School field. This was an expensive project for a comparatively small number of parents. The roll had been falling, first in 1988 and again during the years up to 1995. Families were removing their children to other village schools or private schools, or not starting their five year olds at Ewelme, and newcomers to the village were following suit. Nevertheless, enough money was raised from sponsored walks by the children – round and round the Common – and through various other commendable efforts of parents and children.

In April 1996 Mrs Wendy Jacobs, who had first visited the School when a student at Reading University, was appointed Headteacher, and she and her husband with their two pre-school age daughters, Constance and Dorothea, moved into School House. There were thirty-four children in the School. Eight of these children were due to leave at the end of that term to move on to secondary education. The name of only one child, a grandchild of the Chairman of Governors, had been put down for admission in the September. Since the School is funded per pupil these numbers meant that there would be money for only one teacher. Mrs Jacobs was advised by the Local Education Authority that the only option was to encourage any pupil she could into the School.

During that term and the following summer holidays, Mrs Jacobs and the Governors compiled and circulated a new School Prospectus. The Governors, whose role had been evolving over the past two or three years, now met twice every term. They had organised into groups to cover the curriculum, premises, finance and pastoral matters. The groups held additional meetings when necessary. A decision was made by the Governors to raise money for the School through their own efforts and it was also decided to commemorate each year the founding of the School with a Barn Dance. The Headteacher with the Governors produced School policies and short term and long term development plans. Parents joined in to help with re-organisation of the limited space for administration and secretarial work to include computers and storage space for resources which Mrs Jacobs had already started to order. Supportive visits were now welcomed by the School from Diocesan and LEA Advisers. The Ewelme Trust was able to fund some of the resources under the scheme approved by the Charity Commissioners.

The numbers of children increased dramatically. By April 1997 there were fifty-seven pupils on roll and the Chairman of Governors could write, “We are now over subscribed”. The intake projection for the next three years, taking the School into the new millennium, indicated that there would be no spare places for children in Reception from outside the village. The School and Mrs Jacobs were acquiring a high reputation in the County in a number of ways. School was inspected by HMI in Mrs Jacobs’ second term. Their report concluded that, “The children achieve well – the School has high and rising standards – all the teaching is satisfactory or good or very good”. The problems at this stage were how to teach a modern curriculum, how to observe health and safety standards set by law, how to prevent a child from losing forty hours of teaching and learning over a year – because of restricted and inadequate space.

Mrs Jacobs invited the Trustees of the Ewelme Almshouse Trust to School. The Trustees decided in agreement with the School Governors and the Headteacher that the “only option available, to keep a thriving school in this historical site, was to provide more teaching and learning accommodation”. The Trustees showed courage and foresight. Long negotiations ensued. English Heritage, the Trust, the Conservation Officer of the District Council, the Parish Council and the Charity Commissioners who were responsible for making the Trust’s money legally available for the purpose of building, all agreed that more accommodation would be planned and built.

In the meantime, the older children of Year One and all the children of Year Two moved out of the overcrowded downstairs classroom with their teacher, Miss Wood. The Trustees had allowed School to convert temporarily the Master of the Almshouses’ accommodation into classrooms. With help from Governors and Parents the conversion was expertly achieved and a little ‘school’ ran there very comfortably and successfully for a year. Parents, grandparents, Mrs Clements the School Secretary and other helpers went in to provide extra support. Mrs Slatter continued to teach the younger Year One children and the Reception class in the downstairs classroom. Mrs Jacobs taught the Juniors in the upstairs classroom. Mrs Hollander taught, part-time, the children with special educational needs. As time went on, and School finances began to improve; it became possible to revive a part-time post to which Mrs Hollander was then appointed to teach Religious Education and her specialist subject, Science, often stretching her appointment over extra hours for the benefit of the School.

In 1999 the first national competition for teachers was organised by Lord Putnam and others who wished to recognise the outstanding work being done in the classrooms throughout Great Britain. Mrs Jacobs won the prize for Leadership and Management in the southern region, which included all the primary schools in London. At the final competition in London she came in the top four of the category in competition with three inner-city headteachers. Alice Chaucer, Duchess of Suffolk and Founder, would surely have found Mrs Jacobs to be a “well-disposed woman apt and able to teach” in the words (nearly) of the 1437 Statutes. The Rector of Ewelme, The Reverend Martin Garner, had great pleasure in announcing the news of Mrs Jacobs’ achievement to all those invited to attend the official opening of the two new classrooms at Ewelme School in July 1999.

Today the new buildings speak for themselves. Lofty, airy and filled with natural light they grace a small plot hidden from the road and partly hidden from adjacent buildings. The same distinguished architect of the new classrooms also transformed the upstairs classroom of the original building by creating a gallery Library. This is now used as extra working

space by children who work surrounded by shelves of books under the flood-lit hammer beams of the roof. Downstairs there is now a School Hall cherished for its space for assembly, wet playtimes, music lessons, dinner times, dance and drama. In addition, the staircase which had been in use in Mr Herman's time was replaced by a new one.

The children are busy. In the last half-term of the twentieth century they were preparing for their performances in the village hall to parents and members of the Elm Club; there was singing to practise, words to learn. They had to fit these in with their literacy hour and numeracy hour daily as well as their other lessons. There was more singing practice for a Christingle Service. It had been a busy year with visitors to School including a storyteller and a drama group; visits to Oxford United Football Club, the pantomime, the Wildlife Park, the Synagogue in Oxford, a residential field visit for older children and a visit to the Houses of Parliament. The seven computers in the classrooms, some of them with CD ROMS, are in full use by the children and will soon enable them to be in touch through the Internet and e-mail with schools in Greece, Italy and Sweden. Each year group in School has the opportunity to learn French. The notion of a rural village school in the middle of England in isolation has disappeared.

After School there are clubs for netball, football, spoken English, drama and board games; like the School library, these activities are run by parents. Each Thursday we see the children setting off exuberantly in their royal blue tracksuits, anoraks and trainers with great bags of PE kit on their backs, for the swimming pool and gymnasium at Berinsfield; they travel by coach. "Mechanisation changed the village forever" we heard from a former pupil earlier and the twenty-five or so cars to be seen delivering and fetching the children each day underline this truth. The lucky children are the ones who today can walk to School. But the history of Ewelme School reminds us of the smallest children who had to walk the five miles from the outlying farms, sometimes across fields in all seasons and the numerous children at war-time RAF Benson who walked the mile and a half to School. We should recall also the good people, not named in this history, who at different times taught the children, managed the School, supported the funds, served the dinners and supervised the playground, swept the floors and made up the fires. There is great hope and optimism for all that Ewelme School will continue successfully, well into the new millennium.

HEADTEACHERS THIS CENTURY

William Herman 1895–1925
Robert Quixley 1925-1949
David Jones 1949-1953
Roger Coles 1953-1961
E Milton Nicholas 1962-1966
Anthony Peter Sykes 1966-1970
George Cannon 1971-1986
David Price 1986-1996
Mrs Wendy Jacobs 1996-

This account has been compiled from transcripts of oral interviews conducted by members of the Ewelme Society with people living in Ewelme, and with a small number of former residents of Ewelme in 1998 and 1999 and from the transcript of an interview conducted by Mr G Cannon with a resident born in Ewelme before the turn of the last century, who died in 1986.

Other sources consulted:-

County Archives Oxford

Catalogue No.

T/SA Ewelme National School Admissions Register 1856-1875

T/S Misc. 35 Lesson notes in E.S. 1915-1917

T/SL 118 Log Book 1908-1911

1953-1967

1971-1979

Records of Ewelme Almshouse Trust

Records of Ewelme School Managers and Governors

Records of Ewelme Parish Council

Records of The Ewelme Society

Local Education Authority, Macclesfield House, Oxford

Diocese of Oxford, Church House, Hinksey, Oxford

Public Records Office, Kew, London