

Local Education since 1800 : VI

# NEW SCHOOLS FOR OLD

By 'BEORCHAM'

AT THE END of the present term, Park View School will close down, and it is expected that the site will be completely redeveloped. The main building dates from 1834, and a feature of some interest is a large inscription, 'Girls and Infants', which originally faced the High Street but has been visible only to staff and scholars since a classroom was added to the front of the main building nearly 100 years ago. Despite its prominence, the lettering is seldom noticed by electors who record their votes in this classroom.

Whatever the shortcomings of the buildings in Park View Road, the School Board did not overcrowd the site. When a separate school for infants was needed in 1894, it was built behind the garden of the George public-house, not on part of the school garden or playground.

In Back Lane, on the other hand, managers of the National C.E. Schools went on exploiting a small, almost sun-

less site. The Court House was divided into two classrooms, from one of which a door led to a long, narrow room with curtains separating several classes. On the east side of this room were a small classroom, a cloakroom, and two tiny playgrounds. Between the Court House and the headmaster's (later the sexton's) house, the so-called 'clock room' gave access to another long classroom. On this overcrowded site most of the town's children were taught during almost the whole of the Victorian era.

## NOISY CLASSROOMS

Eventually, the managers found a more salubrious site between Prince Edward Street and Butts Meadow. On July 13, 1897, the foundation stone of a school for boys was laid by Thomas Halsey, M.P. for West Herts. It was the year of the Queen's diamond jubilee, and what better name could have been

found than the Victoria National Boys' School?

The boys were transferred from Back Lane to the new building in 1898. It consisted of four large classrooms with two lobbies. As there were seven standards, some of the rooms were shared by two classes. Glazed partitions helped to reduce distracting noises, the worst of which were caused by hobnailed boots striking cast-iron desk supports. Many years elapsed before a study was provided for the headmaster.

## CONDEMNED BUILDING

Girls had to wait several years for a new school. Meanwhile, the managers had learnt some useful lessons and did not repeat the lack of privacy that was always a problem in the boys' school. Small rooms, one per class, were built on three sides of an assembly hall, and there was a study for the headmistress. Although Edward VII had been on the throne for some years by the time the school was opened, it was called the Victoria Girls' School, the name National having been dropped after the County Council became the education authority under the Act of 1902. At the same time, the Board School became the Council School.

The old classrooms behind the Court House, condemned for purposes of elementary education, continued to be used by the Sunday School and for a great variety of functions; the rooms were described as insanitary, ruinous, lacking light and air and a great fire risk when an appeal was made for St.

Peter's Hall, which was built on part of the site of the old classrooms.

According to Kelly's Directory for 1902, our elementary schools in that year were used to only 75 per cent of their capacity. The first column gives the number of places, the second the average attendance:

Victoria, Boys	250	200
Court House, Girls	240	190
Chapel St. Infants	200	190
Gossoms End Infants	100	60
Northchurch, Boys	120	80
Northchurch, Girls	90	60
Northchurch, Infants	100	69
Board School,		
Boys and Girls	400	270
Board School, Infants	130	70
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	1630	1189
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#### FEWER CHILDREN

The raising of the leaving age to 14 in 1918 caused little extra pressure on our schools; for some years there had been no increase in the population, and the proportion of young people was in fact falling. In Victorian times the average number of children per family was five; by the 1930s the average was just over two per married couple.

In 1931, according to the St. Peter's Hall appeal folder, 921 children attended elementary schools in Berkhamsted and Northchurch, a marked fall from the total of 1,189 twenty-eight years earlier.

By the end of the decade, however, our schools were so crowded that a shift-system had to be worked, some children attending in the morning, others in the afternoon. The Town Hall and some other buildings were also used as schools. But it was war-time, and many, many hundreds of children, with their teachers, had been evacuated to Berkhamsted.

#### PRE-WAR GREENWAY PLAN

In the mid-1930s, there was a growing demand for a secondary school. As on many previous occasions, the Church of England took the initiative, this time under the leadership of the rector, Canon Chipchase Stainsby, who was chairman

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of a diocesan committee on Church schools. Sites were suggested in Greenway and Kitchener's Field, and eventually Greenway was favoured. This plan received official approval but the war stopped further action. However, the governors of the proposed Victoria Secondary School at Greenway were given a 'special agreement' that after the war they could build without further delay.

### **FOUNDLING HOSPITAL**

A memorable event a few years before the war was the transfer of the Thomas Coram Foundling Hospital to Berkhamsted. At the time no one anticipated that it would ever benefit local children. The vast building, designed to accommodate 400 children, all boarders, was ready for occupation in 1935. Older residents recall the stirring sight when the children, in traditional uniform and headed by their band, marched down Chesham Road to the railway station to start their annual holiday.

After the war, the Foundling Hospital became a secondary modern school for town as well as Coram children of eleven years and upwards. As it was thought that two secondary schools were unnecessary, the Victoria managers' plan for Greenway was abandoned. Later, the County Council purchased the Foundling Hospital buildings, all the Coram children left to be boarded out, and in 1955 Ashlyns became a bi-lateral school, the first of its kind in the county.

### **VICTORIA PRIMARY**

The Education Act of 1944 abolished elementary schools. The Victoria Schools were reorganised into secondary modern and primary instead of all-age boys' and girls' schools, and for the first time an annexe was built to cope with the growing number of scholars. When the secondary children moved to Ashlyns, the Victoria classrooms were occupied by the Primary School and by half of the children of Chapel Street Infants' School. Eventually all the infants left Chapel Street and the school was closed. Victoria then became a Primary School under one head teacher.

Recent changes may safely be left to a later local historian. To conclude this series of six articles, tribute must be paid to the many fine teachers who are remembered with affection and gratitude by hundreds of former scholars. It would not be fair to mention names, however; it is so easy to commit sins of omission!