

Trials of a Victorian Headmaster

Early Days at the Chalk School

A SHORT TIME ago hopes were raised that a new use would be found for Park View School as a community centre. But our oldest elementary school, in recent times demoted to the status of 'Annexe to Westfield Primary School', is likely to last a few more terms, used by a few dozen under-11's and visited by a few thousand over-21's whenever there is a local or Parliamentary election.

The school displays its date, 1834, as though it were an advertisement. Originally known as the British School, it was nicknamed the Chalk School because the walls consist largely of chalk rubble. When the County Council gained control it was called the Council School, and renamed Park View School in more modern times. But nowadays there is not much of a view of what is no longer a park.

RUNNING WILD

The school was born at a time when Berkhamsted was as poor as is now rich in educational facilities. Berkhamsted School had almost ceased to function. The Bourne Charity School accepted but a limited number of boys and girls. Few parents could afford to send their children to the town's five private schools—H. and M. Bainbridge's and M. E. Halsey & Co.'s academies for girls, and George Hodson's, Charles Lambert's and J. Sewell's academies for boys.

If not helping in the home, running errands, bird-scaring, stone-picking or fruit-gathering, children were left to run wild. The man who gave the youth of the town a decent start in life was Augustus Smith, better known for having reorganised Berkhamsted School and thwarted the enclosure of Berkhamsted Common.

At a meeting of the vestry on 25th March, 1833, he gained unanimous support for a resolution that 'a good parish school be established for teaching boys and girls reading, writing, arithmetic and useful work.'

Fifteen months later the school was opened. It was built on a piece of land known as Salter's Charity, one of several small local properties given to the parish in 1696 by Edward Salter, who stipulated that the rents were to be distributed among 'the industrious and laborious poor.' A house on Salter's Charity, which ended its days as a wretched, tumbledown workhouse, was pulled down in 1833, when a new workhouse was built near Kitsbury Road corner.

BY

'BEORCHAM'

The materials of the old workhouse at Park View Road corner (the road did not exist at that time) were sold for £45 to swell the funds of the overseers of the poor.

The 'Chalk' School which succeeded the old workhouse was for children of all denominations, provided that they belonged to a Sunday School and that the minister of any congregation had the right to visit the school and instruct children belonging to his own community.

Though at first an enthusiastic supporter of the school, the rector, the Rev. John Crofts, afterwards declared that he would never voluntarily be found working with dissenters. Two years later the Church of England School, alias the National School, was started behind the

Court House, as was described in an article in the *Review* for October 1963.

Despite charges and counter-charges of narrow-mindedness, Berkhamsted had room for the two schools, and competition not only stimulated the respective teaching staffs but often led to free fights between the rival pupils.

PLAYING TRUANT

For the first half of the Victorian era, the managers and headmasters of both schools had to battle against appalling absenteeism. At one time only a third of the children on the 'Chalk' School registers attended regularly. Many never went to school at all. As for the Church School, as late as 1874 the Rev. J. W. Cobb complained of 'the very common practice of sending the children for half a day only.'

Unless a child attended 250 times a year, no government grant was forthcoming. Many parents could not, or would not, pay the 1d., 2d. or 3d. a week that was demanded for their children's education. For example, the 'Chalk' School headmaster reported in 1873 that he had great difficulty in getting the boys to pay 2d. a week; threatening language was used by one mother, who said she 'would not pay the arrears for anybody' and that if either she or her husband called at the school the headmaster would 'both hear and feel them.' A few years later, compulsory education was introduced.

ABSENT TO PICK ACORNS

The earliest log book of the 'Chalk' School starts in 1869, and among entries dated 1870 we find the following: MAY. Plait trade revived. One boy gone to a plaiting school.

JUNE. Six or seven boys are partially employed at home or elsewhere at work done in school time, which is unsatisfactory, and neither one thing nor the other.

SEPTEMBER. A little boy kept from school that he may plait. Two others to mind the baby and two more for pig-keeping. Boy absent because he has no shoes. An elder girl left the school, parents thinking it time she assisted in gaining her living. Several scholars during the week kept from school to pick acorns and blackberries.

On 30th September, 1870, the school was inspected for the first time by Her Majesty's Inspector—none other than Matthew Arnold, the distinguished son of the famous Headmaster of Rugby.

Revisiting the school in 1871, the inspector found 'much tendency to

copying, and the boys ill-behaved.' But even in those days it was considered valuable to arrange visits to places of interest; 23 of the 'largest scholars' and two ex-scholars spent a few hours at Kenilworth Castle under the patronage of the Earl of Clarendon.

THE TEACHER'S CATAPULT

In February, 1872, several children were absent to fetch soup from the kitchens set up in the Castle grounds and at the Swan Brewery to relieve distress among the unemployed. In the same year Mr. A. F. Wakelin was appointed headmaster, and here are a few of his comments:

Some of the boys are very saucy and impudent.

Many boys are away nut-gathering. Monitor Rance is absent. He has a sore head.

Found two little boys in R—'s class asleep. Spoke to the teacher about it.

Albert — (9) learned 72 lines of Byron's *Prisoner of Chillon* in 20 minutes. (In the following year the same lad was reported for truancy.)

Trouble with Pupil Teacher— for shooting in the playground with a catapult, and being brought up before the magistrates charged with poaching. He was acquitted but was given notice to leave.

Yes, boys—and even pupil teachers—will be boys. But human nature is much the same in every generation, and it is not surprising to find that, despite much truancy, there were always full attendances for summer treats and for teas in the schoolroom. Similarly, it was often the Sunday School with the best outings which had the longest registers!

Ring Out, Wild Bells!

BY BELFRY PIGEON

*Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light:
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.*

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

AS I LEAD OFF on the Treble Bell this last hour of 1966 I look round at our band of ringers and wonder what 1967 holds out for them, each and every one of them.

They have been a faithful band, on the whole, throughout 1966; most of the bells having been manged for every service during the year, during both fair and foul weather.

If the striking of the bells has been at times uneven, it is because most of the lads are young, twelve years or so, and still at the first stages of learning this art of campanology. For these lads—ahead lies more school, and the wonder of learning, and a world getting ever broader and broader.

The girls are next in my thoughts, as the bells go round merrily now, in Call Changes. Most of them have just left school or are on the point of leaving. (We have had A-level prep. up in the tower, during intervals on practice nights!) For them then, freedom at last, all the shackles of school and home fall from them, and they are off on their own—for some how exciting this is. For others, how uncertain and full of misgiving.

One of our band is already working in the Pestalozzi Children's Home in Switzerland and by all accounts, enjoying this mightily.

Half way through now, 1966 running out fast—a pity it's going, in many ways, we have enjoyed it, most of us, but now when I think of the mothers (the minority group in the tower) I remember that they are a year older! What indeed has 1967 for them?

Perhaps it is the maintaining of a home that is secure and happy, 'a place to come to', for all the family. Perhaps it is the hope that lies in their children (perhaps the darning of father's socks!) Whatever it is, they have their uses in the band (one of them is our captain) pulling their weight (weight of bell!) and helping to get their children to the tower on time.

Now the New Year is almost here and I come round to our last bell, the one that is the heaviest and speaks the loudest, our tenor.

With its sonorous tone, the bell that does most work of all, it alarms the land if there is danger, it tolls for the dead, but right now it is keeping a good and even place at the end of each round of bells, and the treble bell relies upon its always being there so that the next round can be led from it... A most important bell indeed, and as I look at the man who never fails to turn up to ring it, usually with sweat pouring from his brow, I wonder what 1967 will bring for him, and I hope that it will bring him much fun with his children and much happiness throughout the year.

Our last round now:

*Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land;
Ring in the Christ that is to be.*

Then a call to "Stand over bells!" 1967 is here—a Happy New Year to us all!

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