

## SLIP END SCHOOL

We are fortunate to possess 'log books' of the school which go back to the first days. They tell their own story, though not all that we would like to know. The first Headmaster was David Moon, and he writes this:

*"March 12. Log Book only now obtained, the school was formally opened February 1st 1877 but, school material not having arrived from London, the opening for work was postponed till Monday afternoon, February 12th when 140 children were entered upon the school books".*

The school was located towards the Pepperstock end of Front Street and Summer Street, and is now the location of the small development of flats known as 'Old School Walk'. It was a 'Board School' established as a consequence of the famous 1870 Education Act giving education to all. It catered for the whole age range in two sections - Juniors and Infants and in 1947 was extended to 15 year olds. A century after foundation, virtually to the month, the school moved to its present site which used to be clay pits for local brick production.



*The old School, viewed from Front Street, 1973*

The first years are very interesting as a record of life at that time. For many of the children it was their first experience of school and they knew little or nothing - not even the alphabet, or simplest of addition. For Mr Moon the first months must have been more daunting than exciting as he sought to establish the school. Shortage of staff was one recurring theme of the early years. At first there was only himself and his wife. One teacher joined from Bideford in Devon, Miss Coles, a very young girl but she did not stay long. There was a frequent turnover of staff. One commentator has noted that Mr Moon must have been a hard man to work for, very strict and too demanding of his staff. It is true that he was often critical.

Perhaps though, it is unfair to judge him by our attitudes. In those early years it was difficult to get teachers who were 'certificated' that had proved their ability. The classes were not easy to discipline. Mr Moon spent some 25 years at the school and comes across as a caring man, who achieved a good standard in the school. He was known in the village as 'Daddy Moon' which suggests endearment rather than hostility. In the early days there were immense problems because children did not attend school regularly; it is not difficult to see why. Most had never attended before and educationally were at the same standard as children five years their junior. Parents often kept them away either because they could not afford the loss of their labour, boys in the fields, girls in straw plaiting; in some cases, they could not afford the small fee. There is a preoccupation with school attendance figures throughout the first log book. There was another side to this; he had to show at least a minimum attendance for each child in order to qualify for a grant.

The pressure was on. By the end of March 1877, Mr Moon had persuaded the school committee to meet each Thursday to see parents whom they summoned in advance, "to ascertain the cause and to prevent the repetition of such offence". There were over 180 on the roll, but daily attendances averaged only 80 to 90. By April, the 'Factory Act Inspector' had called in at the school, to discover only one girl present in the age group where they were to attend half-time (the other half being out at work). An additional cause for non-attendance was, of course, the weather: snow cut the village off sometimes and rain made long walks from S7 Luton Hoo unattractive, also there was illness, often in small epidemics of scarletina, scarlet fever and 'blister pox'.

Harvest was also a strong disincentive to attending school. In the early years of the school, when children were important to the labour strength at harvest, the summer holiday (called 'Harvest Holiday') was often decided at a week's notice, to coincide with with harvest. In one of the first years only 64 children, about one third of the school roll, turned up in September on the first day of term. Poverty was widespread. Sometimes children did not attend because their parents could not afford the fees at that time, "*scarcity of work in straw*". The copy books had to be

paid and Mr Moon writes *"We have a difficulty with the copy books, here, and in all the schools. Parents will not readily buy them and the board will not supply free of charge"*. The board expected him to collect the fees, but he found this difficult and implied that it was the board who were out of touch. It was not until 1891 that the education was given entirely free by Act of Parliament. Caringly, he often paid for the copy books of poor children from his own money.

Charles Lissaman took over as Headmaster on the retirement of Mr Moon in the spring of 1902. Like his predecessor he was to remain a long time and thus provided the continuity and stability that the school thrived on. Mr J. Harley took over as Headmaster in 1929, and remained until August 1948. The standard of education which was a consequence of such stability must have been good. There were several who achieved notable careers who began at Slip End Elementary School; e.g. Tony Lines became Chairman of the Luton Borough Education Committee, Johnny Burgoyne became Mayor of Luton. More recently there have been at least three who gained doctorate degrees at university; Hawkings, Rustidge and Liddle. Perhaps Her Majesty's Inspector, who wrote in 1878, *"This is a new school, promising well"*, was very right.

The infant head teacher, Mrs Nears, writes about a remarkable change in the cleanliness of infant children's heads in 1911. The reason was that two parents were imprisoned because of the neglect of their children. We presume that cleanliness had something to do with it! The records often show that representatives from the NSPCC called about children. Neglect happened as much in earlier school history as it does today, if not more. Perhaps more surprising to us is that many parents in the early years did not know the age of their children. Mr Moon had to visit every home and try to illicit some evidence. Entry in a 'Family Bible' was permissible, where there was no birth certificate. It was reckoned that some deliberately falsified the age of their children, to enable them to start work at an earlier age.

The heating of the school was a constant cause for concern. Too hot in the summer, a complaint in early May one year of a classroom temperature of 80, or bitterly cold in the winter. Often children were kept at home because of the cold. This became especially true in the years of the First World War. In January 1917 Mr Lissaman closed the school because the temperature inside had dropped to 29. He seems only to have complained when the temperature fell below 40. The children could not work in such low temperatures. Mr Moon had written much earlier that, *"The children have been unable to hold their pens or pencils and have shivered in their seats"*.

The first world war was presumably the most difficult time for the school in the years under Mr. Lissaman. He begins the record by writing in September 1914, *"Since school last met, the country is completely upset"*, an unusual turn of phrase! Later on he talks of the district being *"infested"* with soldiers. The war affected the school in a variety of ways. There was the patriotism; girls knitted socks and scarves, boys made belts and toys for orphan children. There was a Trafalgar Day as well as Empire Day each year and also the Waterloo Centenary. Soldiers billeted at the school one night and that was marked down with pride. Later on, a 'War Shrine' was erected, a board with the names of 136 people who had gone to serve "King and Country". The other ways in which the school was affected were predictable. Maintenance of the school was poor; once the playground was flooded for 9 weeks. When fuel for the stores ran out, it sometimes took several weeks before a new supply came, during which time low temperatures were unbearable.

Sanitary conditions, poor by our standards, also worsened; there was a lack of earth for the 'offices' (presumably for shoveling into the sanitary pits, to prevent disease). There was an increase in disease and epidemics which we know in Mr Moon's years were fairly common; scarlet fever, diphtheria and lots of 'coughing'. Then in 1918 and 1919 massive epidemics of 'flu caused high absenteeism, even in the summer months on one day, 92 children were absent. There was undernourishment. With a shortage of labour on the farms older children were usually asked to help pick potatoes in October. At the close of the war, Mr Lissaman was asked to weigh each child and furnish the education department with the statistics. On top of this was a gradual shortage of teaching staff. By early 1917 there were only two teachers for 120 to 140 children. For much of 1918 Mr Lissaman taught the whole school on his own, with spasmodic and occasional help.

The Second World War had a different history. The bombing by air of London was a threat which forced a massive evacuation in the early weeks of the war. 120 children and nine teachers arrived from three schools in Camden. Of course, as we know now, it was some time until the Luftwaffe actually attacked and consequently many children and teachers returned. Accommodation was cramped, the village did not always take kindly to the evacuees, but co-operation among the teachers was good. The school was kept open in the holidays in order to occupy and amuse the evacuee children, who sadly were sometimes treated separately. By April 1940 there were only two teachers from

Camden left and by 1943, the retirement of two teachers left the school seriously short of staff. Classes were often of over 90 children, but even if relief could be found, there was no accommodation being offered in the village. Though there was no threat of bombing, enemy aircraft were often seen overhead and 'blackout' was strictly observed. As in the previous war, the older children were directed to do potato picking. When the war came to an end, three days holiday was granted due to the "*surrender unconditionally of Germany*".

And so we come up to the present era, with a plethora of progress and change. The conditions of the building were improved; two huts were erected, school dinners were provided, school leaving age was increased up to a 15 years: finally the division of the ages to produce a 'lower school', as at present. The buildings and playground were expanded, water was laid on, outside toilets built and mains sewage installed. 1955 was a year which saw many more school alterations, and eventually in 1976 a new school was built and they moved in January 1977.

There are very many more developments which could be noted, so dramatic is the change with previous periods of the schools history, but one which has remained significant to this day was the formation of a Parent-Teachers Association in 1949, which has deepened the relationship between school and village.